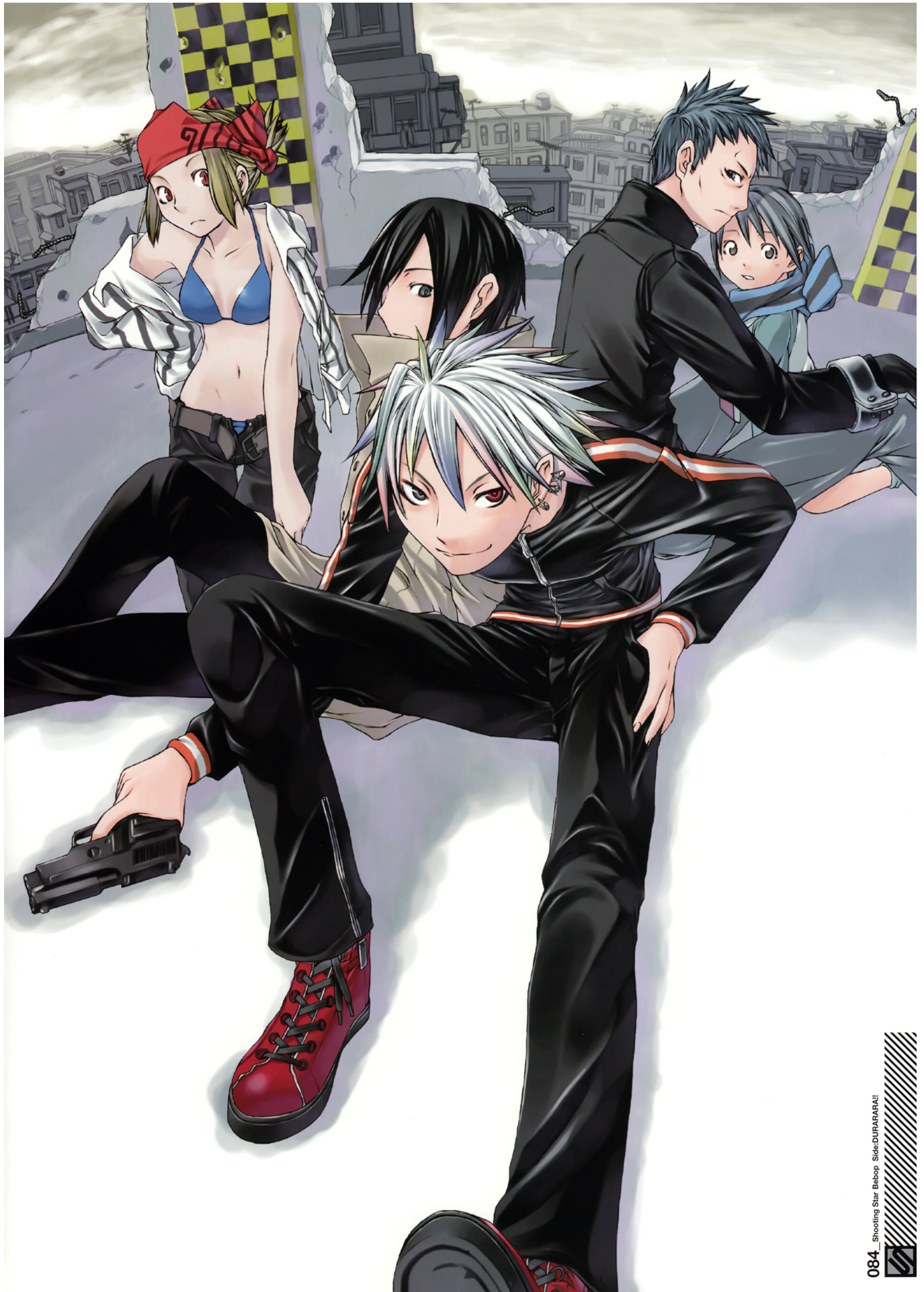




成田良悟
Ryohgo Narita

ドクワウ!
BOWWOW!
Two Dog Night

 電撃文庫



The longest bridge in the world, standing between Sado and Niigata. The nameless artificial island in the very middle of the bridge, abandoned in the recession, is a lawless world swarming with illegal immigrants and criminals —a modern-day Kowloon Walled City.

Two young men enter the island.

The meek and quiet Seiichi Kugi, seeking a sense of adventure with his childhood friend.

The criminal Hayato Inui, drawn in by some unknown desire.

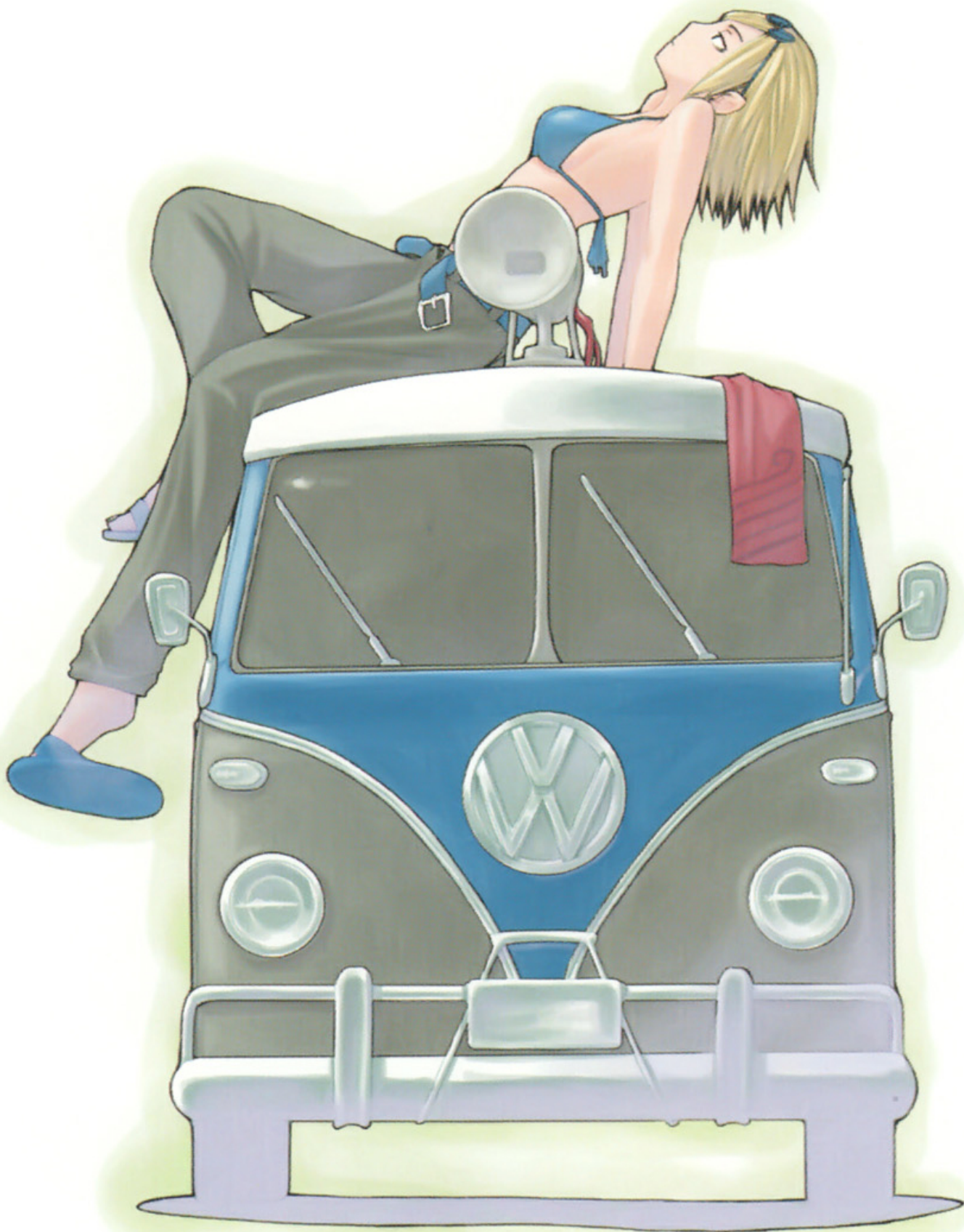
They begin to walk two entirely separate paths in this lawless world. But their respective journeys look much like a dog barking at its own reflection.

BOWWOW!

Two Dog Night

Ryohgo Narita
Illustration Suzuhito Yasuda







The City Aboveground

—Seiichi Kugi, an executive of the Western District

Welcome to this new world. We are truly pleased by your arrival. After all, no matter your reasons, you've been part of our community since the moment you set foot in this city.

It's none of my concern what rumors you've heard about the city, and how much faith you place in those rumors.

But I'd like to inform you that most are baseless accusations.

These streets? Dangerous? Not at all. Compared to Los Angeles or unstable parts of the Middle East, your chances of getting involved in criminal activity or a shootout are extremely low. Although I suppose it's a little more likely than being involved in the same in Shinjuku or Shibuya.

We're often compared to the Kowloon Walled City, but that's a troubling parallel from our perspective. We'd rather not be treated the same as such a dangerous place. And I wonder—of the people in the press who spread those rumors, how many have actually been to there in person, do you think? In fact, I doubt such people have ever even set foot on this island, either.

They don't realize that their gossip just draws more and more lowlifes to the city! Or maybe they do, and are working harder to fan those rumors for that very reason.

In any case, if you plan to put down your roots here, I suggest you conduct yourself in a manner that does not further encourage such gossip.

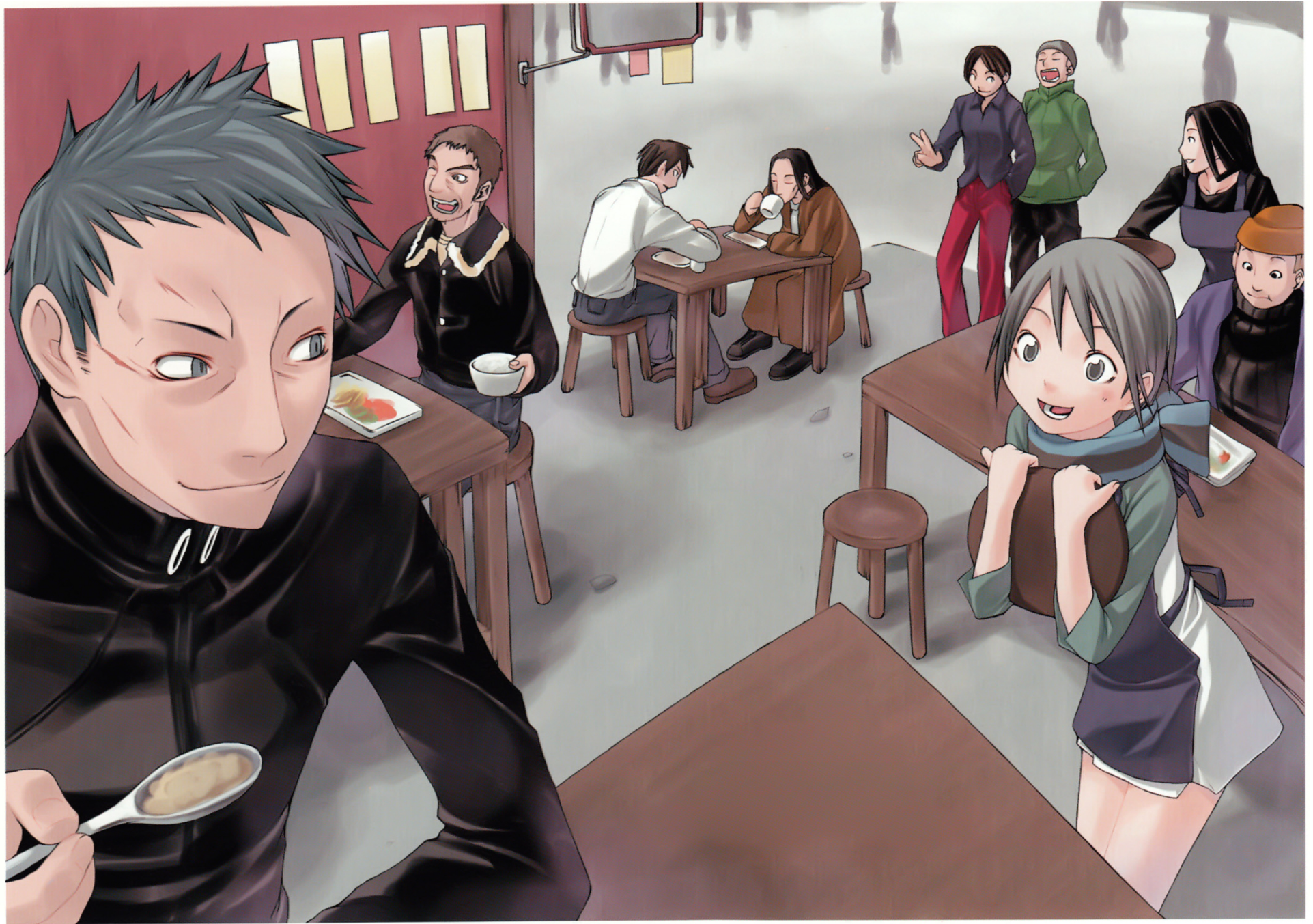
Hm? You came to find freedom, but this isn't what you bargained for, you say?

Hah hah... Make no mistake. The Western District has only one rule.

'Do not defy us'.

That's all. Liberating, isn't it?

Well then, I wish you a comfortable life.



The City Belowground

—Souji Kuzuhara, captain of the volunteer police force

—yeah. Never seen you before. Ah, you're a newbie.

(Silence)

What, something on my face? You're creeping me out. Oh, you think it's strange there's a restaurant here? I get it. Guess that's a pretty normal thought for a newcomer.

(Silence)

Hey Yua, can I get an omelet-soba combo and some oolong tea?

You should order something. This place's got the best food in the Western District. And the best prices. If you're gonna live here, you have to at least figure out how you're gonna feed yourself.

What, you wanna know if we have an economy? Why wouldn't we, with so many people in one place? If you don't like that, just go back to the mainland and put a cardboard box around yourself at a station or a park. Or go work hard and earn yourself a home.

(Silence)

Shut up and eat.

(Silence)

That hit the spot. —Yua, I'm out of coins. Can you give me some change?

If you want to live as well as everyone else, you gotta work. That goes the same on this island, too.

I'm not gonna *welcome* you, but I'm not gonna stop you from living here. So long as you don't try anything stupid.

And if you think this place is some sort of land of freedom, let me give you a piece of advice.

This is Japan. Freedom doesn't come easy anywhere. ...Don't forget that.



The Pits

—Hayato Inui, hoodlum

Well lookey here. Welcome to the island's number one craphole.

I saw you get in a scrap just now. You were shit. How do you expect to get by if you get your ass kicked that quick?

Anyway, you're a true blue local now. Congrats. You're a piece of trash. The second you step in here, you're just an unemployed shit, you know that?

Or did you come here for a fun sightseeing tour? To get some dangerous toys? Then I wouldn't stop you, but you probably shoulda gone to Tokyo or Osaka instead. I'm guessing you followed all the rumors here, but the *really* dangerous toys? They're hiding in places where people can't spread rumors 'bout 'em.

You know what they say about getting used to a place and calling it home? That's exactly it! Even a hellhole like this is home, once you get used to it. But you better remember—wherever there's people, there's crime and violence. Y'know, they say city folks are moving back to the countryside to get away from all the pollution. Applies here just as much. The longer you get used to things and settle down, the more you see of shit you don't wanna see.

Enough with the lecture. Welcome to our little world. This is the island of dreams. Not the one in Tokyo Bay. This place makes you *really* dream. Though it's up to you if it becomes The NeverEnding Story or A Nightmare on Elm Street.

If you're gonna enjoy this island, you'll need 1% effort, 5% wit, 20% experience, and 99% luck. What, that's more than a hundred? No shit, dumbass.

Just means we're always living in overdrive.

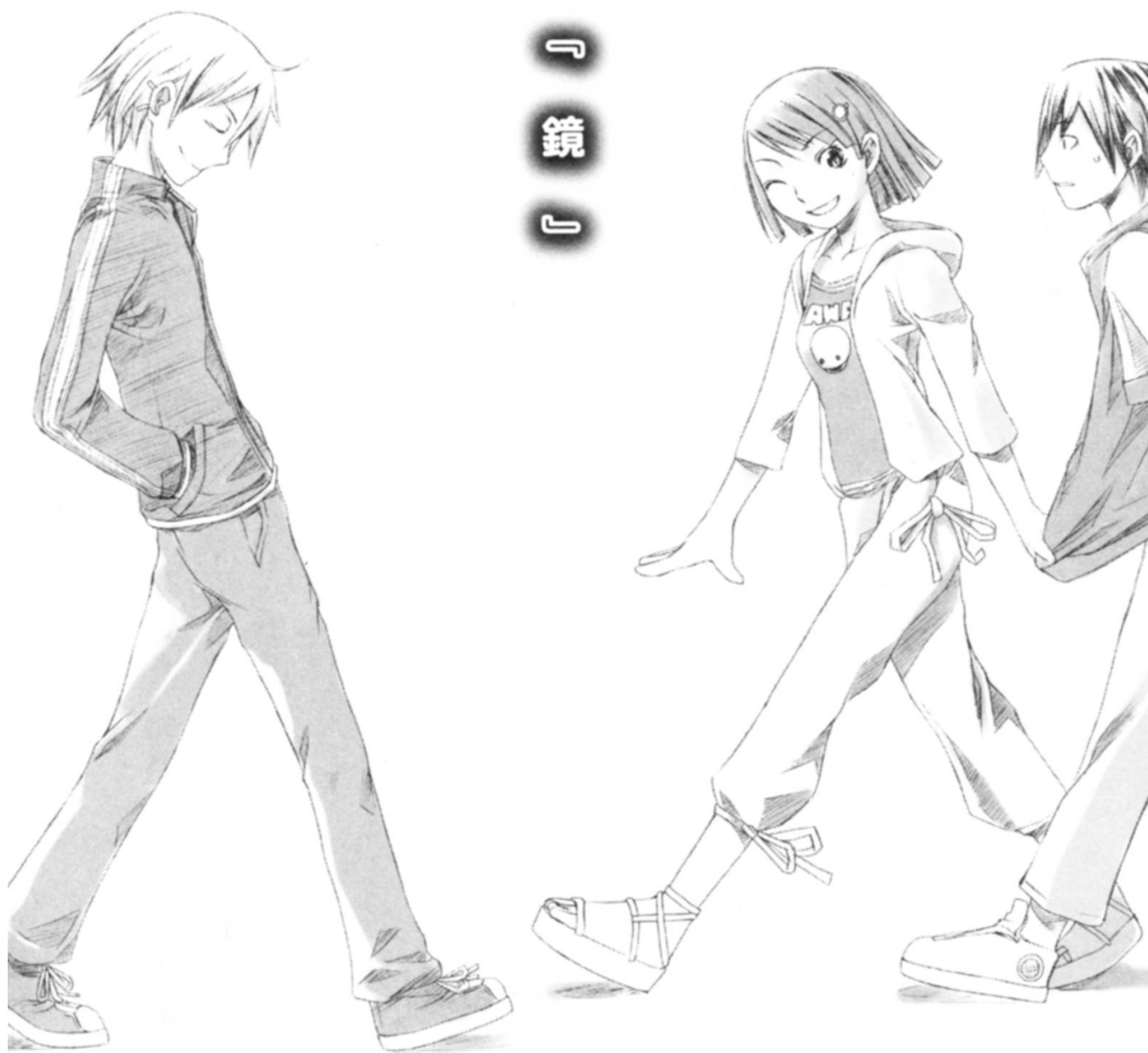
Cause that's the prerequisite for enjoying this place.





序章

『鏡』



Prologue: Mirror Images

August 18, 2014. The Sado Island side of the Etsusa Bridge.

Under the endlessly clear blue sky, the gunshot resonated into the air.

Then, her body gave a dull quiver.

The flesh on her back and side scattered to bits.

"Huh?"

The boy watching from behind could do nothing but intone witlessly.

Something warm splattered onto his cheek.

He quickly wiped it with his hand. His fingertips were stained red.

"Blood...?"

The moment he came to the realization, the girl collapsed onto the dirt-covered pavement. She seemed to tremble, twitching furiously on occasion. As though a rhythm was engraved into her, she madly shook and seized.

Something red spread over the pavement around her.

And only when the pool reached his own feet did the boy realize what was happening.

'—shot her. Someone shot Kanae!'

When the understanding finally hit him, his senses began to return, one by one. Filling his ears were the clear sounds of gunfire, and a howl of angry yells.

Men in outdated clothing were divided into two groups, shooting and shouting at the other like no tomorrow. They rushed in every direction. Some took shelter and peered out from behind things like drum canisters. Some ran parallel with their enemies and sometimes tripped. Some remained rooted firmly to the ground. The only commonality was the fact that once in a while their guns roared with a flash of light.

A shootout between two groups of thugs, like a scene out of a decades-old police show.

Watching the scene unfold, the boy remembered where they stood.

It was neither the mainland nor the island.

It was Japan, yet not.

It was neither land nor sea.

The longest bridge in the world, spanning Sado Island and Niigata.

The nameless artificial island that stood in the very middle of that bridge—



At the same time, in the city of Niigata. Rainbow Tower.

Atop a bus terminal in the heart of Niigata stood a colorful observation tower. The observation deck cocooned a section of the garish pillar, rotating around it as it ascended and descended.

“Man, I’m starving.”

The observation deck had just picked up passengers from the lowest floor. Inside, a man stood reluctantly as he languidly complained.

“Dammit. I’m actually hungry. It’s so bad I feel almost sick. —That’s the gist of it.”

The man explained his condition in great detail to the family sitting beside him.

His hair was dyed in seven colors, and there were countless safety pins sticking through his ears. His eyes were of different colors, but that was thanks to the contact lenses he wore.

It had been over a decade since the 21st century began. And though young people's fashions changed constantly over the years, the man's style fitted none that had existed. There was clearly something different about him.

The family next to him did not seem to know how they should respond. The father said nothing, his palms covered in sweat. His eldest, a girl about 10 years old, was holding a bag of snacks. The younger one was a kindergartener. They both stared at the man's hair, captivated.

Whether or not he could read the family's mood, the rainbow-haired man did not take his eyes off the scenery. The world outside spun slowly. The mountains of Sado Island across the sea and the rough black buildings stretching from the base of the mountains came into his view.

"Ah! There, there. I see it. Heh. To be honest, I came just to see that thing over there." He said to the silent family in a subtly affable voice.

The structure at the end of his gaze was the monstrous bridge that connected Sado to the mainland, and the massive artificial island in the middle. Rainbow-Head pressed his face to the glass, mumbling to himself.

"Look at the size of that. Bigger than anything I'd ever imagined. And that's some crazy length, too. I was sure you could just swim to Sado if you'd wanted," he mumbled to himself, but suddenly he turned to the family. "Ain't this amazing? Couldn't tell from the ground, but I never thought there'd be an observation tower that went this high. To be honest with ya, I gave up lunch to get on this thing. Heh. Thought it was free, but turned out there was an entrance fee."

The father finally smiled and nodded. It wasn't clear what he was nodding to, but he seemed to have decided that it was in his best interests to respond somehow.

At that moment, the older girl handed Rainbow-Head her bag of snacks. Her parents gulped, but the man grinned and took out a single piece from the bag.

"Thanks, kiddo. You'll grow up to be a real beauty, I guarantee it."

Making a face that clashed with his look, he tossed the snack into his mouth.

At that point, the deck again faced Sado Island.

Gazing at the rainclouds across the great bridge, Rainbow-Head stretched.

“Talk about one amazing view. And the weather’s great, too. Man, I am getting pumped.”

Under the endlessly blue skies, the clouds slowly multiplied.



Under the choking-thick layer of clouds, the rain leashed the boy and girl in place.

The shootout had ended just about when—with a clap of thunder—drops of rain began to fall. The losing side fled, cursing up a storm, and the winning side gave chase.

The boy and the girl were the only ones left in the splattering rain.

The downpour left a large puddle to form around her. Her blood dripped into the water, painting the bridge red.

But it was too vast a place to call a bridge.

Standing aimlessly on the endless pavement connected to the artificial island, the boy quietly looked down at the girl.

He fell into thought as though his body had frozen.

Why they had come to such a place,

And how things had come to this—

24 hours ago. Himezaki Lighthouse, Sado Island.

The boy and the girl looked up at the clear sky without a care in the world.

A kite was gliding gracefully through the air, but the sight did not particularly move the boy.

After all, it was too familiar a scene for a longtime local like him.

He was smiling because *she* was next to him.

Not knowing that, the girl made a sudden suggestion.

"C'mon, let's go."

"Huh? *There*? ...No. Mom's going to give me a scolding, and we might get arrested if we're caught."

It was the end of summer. A young couple was outside, enjoying their final summer break of middle school. Although they were a little old for the descriptor, they were a boy and a girl.

The sky was a clear blue. They sat on a bench next to the lighthouse, leaning against each other.

"Cops? It's no big deal!"

"Whining's not gonna get you anywhere."

The boy scowled at his childhood friend.

On the last day of summer vacation, Seiichi Kugi's childhood friend Kanae Orisaki made a strange suggestion.

"Hey, wanna try going to the bridge?"

Seiichi assumed she was talking about Kaifu Bridge or Kurohime Bridge on the island. But was that really where a pair of locals like them wanted to go for one last memory of summer?

He made a confused face. Kanae continued without a care.

"I found a little gap we could squeeze through to Etsusa Bridge!"

"What?"

He recalled the crude building jutting off the southern edge of the island. Etsusa Bridge had the biggest presence on the island, but it was not particularly associated with the function of a bridge. After all, he had never crossed the bridge—in fact, he had never even gone near it.

The bridge was massive in width, with six lanes in each direction. It even had three levels for different types of roads—one level for the massive thoroughfare, another for public use, and another for tourism. But no car had ever crossed the bridge. No normal islander even approached the entrance. It was the same for people on the mainland, and at the two entrances to the bridge were heavy barricades and watches posted at all times.

Why in the world should they sneak onto that bridge?

"You know what kind of place it is, Kanae—"

"Yep. That's exactly why I want to go! I heard there's lots of stuff there you can't find on Sado, or even in Niigata or Tokyo. Things you can't buy in Japan, and exotic animals. And even a casino and an underground pro wrestling ring!"

"No way. Life's not a manga, you know. The pro wrestling ring's just a rumor. And how could there be stores on that island in the first place?"

"Good question. Let's go and get some answers!"

Seiichi had listened to her go on that way for more than half the day. He had no intention of going, and had tried to stop her. But she hadn't even pretended to listen.

"When else would we get a chance to go? If I wait until I'm an adult, it feels like I really *won't* be able to come back."

"And if kids like us end up there, we might die *before* we come back. Remember what your dad always says? About how no one in his right mind would live there?"

"It's going to be fine. We'll just take a look. A really quick peek! We just have to make sure we don't get caught. And even if we do, it's not like we'll get killed on the spot."

Kanae energetically stood from the bench, blocked Seiichi's view, and took him by the arms.

"Whoa."

Dragged to his feet, the boy was led running after her.

Even after Kanae let go, he sprinted behind her.

"Wait...hold on."

"Tomorrow! We're going for sure!"

So quick was her pace that, in the end, he could not catch up to her.

"What do I do?"

Until that point, Seiichi had always been dragged along with her whims.

They had gone into restricted areas in the mines, stowed away on ferries, and even left on impulse to Hokkaido. The excitement in their daily life was all thanks to Kanae dragging Seiichi into her plans, but he never once got angry at her for it.

As their abnormal days continued, they began to share a sort of connection and a sense of intoxication. As though they were the main characters of a story.

Seiichi was slowly gripped by a hero complex as he followed Kanae's reckless actions. He *had* saved her each time she found herself in trouble. That would never change—or so he believed—and that was why a part of him, perhaps, wanted to join her on her latest whimsical adventure.

And, earlier today.

"Are we really going to do this?"

"Of course we are! We've come this far, haven't we?"

They were in the supply yard, only a stone's throw from the entrance of the bridge. Though the bridge and the roads were mostly complete, a great deal of materials and supplies had been left on the site.

Barricades towered over the construction site that served as the bridge entrance. But there was a single break in the fence in the back of the yard, and it was possible to enter through the gap.

Piles of metal frames and whatnot turned the yard into a veritable maze. Seiichi was already gripped by the thought that he had drifted into another world.

"There's a hole that leads into the construction site in this gap! Once we get there, we'll just have to sneak past the watch at the building in the front."

"Look. Footprints..."

When Seiichi peered between the materials, he saw what seemed to be many sets of footprints. Perhaps they had been made during the previous night's rain—they were still clear in the dirt.

"Yeah! There must be other people who go in and out this way. Feel better now?"

He did not answer her question, but kept his eyes on the footprints.

'How could she be so calm when she doesn't even know whose tracks those are?'

At that point, he came to an even more frightening realization.

There were clearly fewer prints coming out than going in.

Once they entered, they could not leave, it seemed to say. A chill ran down Seiichi's spine.

"Kanae, let's just—"

He looked up to stop her, but she was already gone.

Ignoring Seiichi as he stood rooted in place, she had squeezed through first.

“W-wait!”

Seiichi walked after her. They snuck past the self-appointed watch and pushed between the materials in the construction site to step onto the bridge.

The artificial island was about 10 kilometers away from Sado Island. Rumors said that they would reach the residential district before they made it to the island itself.

The term ‘residential district’ was not an official one—it was merely the place where vagrants and criminals, or those who had no other choice, settled on the unopened bridge.

The distinctive residences, made of materials left over from the construction, were supposedly a dead ringer for Hong Kong’s Kowloon Walled City.

Although it had been years since the Kowloon Walled City was demolished, there were no plans for this bridge to ever be taken down. How could a place like this have popped up in Japan, where public security was better than in Hong Kong at the time, Seiichi sometimes wondered. But he never thought too deeply about it.

After all, he had little interest in the topic to begin with, and the bridge (with its lack of interaction with the world) really felt like another country to him.

When they had walked for about two hours, they began to notice people. Seiichi and Kanae took the emergency stairwell on the side to the upper level. A thick layer of clouds covered the sky. Though they were on a bridge over the sea, there was dirt layered over the pavement. They stood there and took in the strangeness of their surroundings, buffeted by the sea breeze.

Seiichi’s emotions reached a point where it felt as though he really had been thrust into another country. Which wasn’t entirely wrong, as Japan’s laws had no meaning there.

An uneasy anxiety coalesced and roiled in his gut. On one hand, he was terrified of the silence around him. On the other, he celebrated the extraordinary day that had come upon him.

That was when silhouettes began to appear in the distance.

Several of what looked to be buildings were clustered together against the background of the artificial island and its unusual structures. Several men leaned against the buildings and the sides of the bridge, eyeing the boy and the girl curiously.

Their clothes were much rougher than what Seiichi had expected, like those of vendors from a tropical country. To be specific, men who might run food stands in South America or Southeast Asia.

One of the men drew near. Seiichi froze without thinking, but Kanae continued undeterred.

Soon, the man stood in her way.

"Don't see this every day. You from Sado?"

"Yeah. Are you a local?"

"Whaddaya want here?"

The man ignored her question. He was in a tank top that revealed his arms and shoulders, which were without a single layer of flab. The veins on the backs of his hands bulged.

Not cowed by the man's bulldozing over her question, Kanae replied, "we're tourists. Me and my boyfriend wanted to make some memories of summer break."

The man's eyebrow twitched. It was a vague mix of anger and laughter. Worried, Seiichi reached into his pockets and fixed his grip on their contents. In one, a can of pepper spray Kanae got for him in Tokyo which fit right into his palm. In the other pocket, he kept his fingers over the buttons on his phone so he could call at a moment's notice.

But rather than attack or shove Kanae, the man pointed her over with his chin.

It was a surprising reaction. Seiichi and Kanae had been prepared to have things thrown at them, or in the worst-case-scenario, to see knives or guns being drawn.

Seiichi followed Kanae through the men. "Want some powder?" One offered. "Any new convenience stores on Sado?" Wondered another. "You got today's paper?" Asked yet another man.

The two of them were clearly not the first visitors from the island. The men probably made a habit of greeting 'tourists'.

When they finally made it through the group of men, Kanae whispered to Seiichi, "that wasn't what I expected. I'm a little disappointed."

"I'm not."

While Seiichi was happy that nothing had happened, a part of him wished otherwise. But holding back that thought, he raised his voice in complaint.

"I don't think it's a good idea to get too pushy with these people, Kanae."

"It'll be fine. If anything happens, you'll save me, right?"

Seiichi could not respond. Though she sounded almost manipulative, he could not disagree.

'Right. I'll protect Kanae.'

To them, the bridge and the island were not reality. It was a world away from home. And his role was to protect her. That was the setting Seiichi has decided for himself.

To him, protecting Kanae was his ultimate goal and pleasure.

"Yeah."

Was it the summer heat? Or was it the euphoria of escaping danger? Seiichi put to words something he'd normally be too embarrassed to say.

"I'll protect you, Kanae. Now and alwa-"

Before he could finish, he heard a gunshot.

And before his eyes was Kanae, stained red as her back leapt toward him.

Then came the present time.

The world around him was obscured by the torrential rain.

The sights, the sounds, and the air had done a 180.

Her twitching had stopped, giving way to stillness. Seiichi finally returned to his senses. Shaking, he took slow, plodding steps toward Kanae.

'I have to help her,' he thought, but he could not bring himself to run. Mere meters seemed like a distant, heavy length.

Stepping into the red pool she bled, Seiichi felt the truth with his entire being.

That this was reality.



"Goddamn. Reality's a cruel mistress." Said a bearded man on a small fishing vessel at the edge of the Niigata harbor.

"Huh?"

The man in the bridge asked him what was wrong. The bearded man lit a cigarette and grumbled.

"I finally get work for once, but turns out it's just a one-man ferry job. Not even worth the pay."

"Can't help it, man. Least you're ripping him off good, right?"

"True."

The bearded man turned with a crack of the neck. A garish shape entered his sights.

A flashy head of hair dyed in the colors of the rainbow.

"That him?"

"Gotta be. Look for funky hair, he said."

"*That* funky? Might get us roped into trouble."

"As if. He's got a one-way ticket anyway."

As they spoke, the young man with garish hair approached the boat.

The bearded man scratched his head and called the young man over.

"Hey, you with the hair. You'd be..."

"Hayato Inui. You got it. What's up?"

The young man was about 20 years of age. He flashed the men a hearty grin and stepped aboard.

"Nice mop."

"I went to Shinjuku and asked for whatever was in style. And they gave me this. I took their word for it, but now I'm not sure I should have."

"Look around you, man."

"Hey, it's my first time in Japan in five years. Can't help it if I'm a little behind the times."

The boat carrying the rainbow-haired man—Hayato Inui—quietly slipped out of the harbor.

Its destination: the artificial island in the middle of the bridge.

The little boat bobbed along, looking a little out of place in the vastness of the sea.

As the city of Niigata grew distant in their sights, the bearded man's cigarette burned out.

"I never asked to live like this. If that shit hadn't gone down, I'd have about as much money as anyone, and I'd be doing real proper work. You get me?" He complained.

"Then what the hell happened?" Hayato asked, unfriendly but clearly curious.

"I was working on that bridge."

As they approached the artificial island, the outline of the bridge grew sharper. Its smart architecture was muddled by the illegal buildings crowded around it.

The bearded man stared nostalgically, recounting the past.

"They had plans for something like this decades ago. Building a bridge or an underground tunnel between Sado Island and Niigata. More of an idea than a plan, maybe. But that went down the drain. The government didn't see any merit to it."

The man recalled history as though it were part of his own memory.

"But see, a few things fit together in the new millennium."

"Yeah?"

"One was the new vein of gold they found on Sado. They'd closed down the last of the mines in '89, saying it was dry. But then they found a new vein a little deeper down. That was around when Japan came up with this new technique—building an island in the sea. Some tech that revolutionized the concept of artificial islands! Lemme tell you about it—"

The bearded man's lecture continued for an hour. A minute into the lecture, Hayato decided that it had nothing to do with him and decided to zone out, idly voicing agreement on occasion.

"—and that's how it worked out. They could develop these islands cheaper and faster than ever. Tech's always been Japan's thing, and the government decided to show off and apply it everywhere. ...Where was I... Ah, right. Other things that fit together. A couple of National Diet members from

Niigata suddenly hit it big. And the prefectural governor back then was really gung-ho about developing Niigata, god knows why.”

The bearded man was surprisingly talkative. The history of the bridge followed.

“But guess what? That was when the world’s longest over-sea bridge was just about being finished in China. Between Shanghai and Ningbo, I think. Was it 35, 36 kilometers? Anyway, Japan decided to beat that record. But the depths were totally different. Over here’s way deeper than over in China. That’s why they decided to build that huge-ass island in the middle. An artificial island made of the world’s best tech. Strong enough to stand up to ocean waves and heavy snow.”

The man’s cheeks reddened as he lost himself further and further in the telling.

“But that’s when a bunch of things fit together just right again. In the opposite direction.”

There was a lonely look in his eye as the enthusiasm drained from his tone.

“One, they ran out of gold. The investigation said it was a big vein, but once they started digging, they hit rock almost right after. There was a lot of reasons, but all I can say for sure is that there wasn’t any more gold.”

“They started the bridge by then?”

“Started? Nah, they were almost *done*. So we didn’t give a crap about that business and kept on working on her. They had buildings put up on the island, and it was just a few things away from finishing...and that’s when the terrorist bombing happened. Construction got stopped. They caught the bomber, but that was just the beginning. The government changed hands three times over the next year, and things were real unstable inside and out, politically speaking. So they couldn’t start up construction again. Back then, everyone was scared the country was finished.”

With a complicated expression, the bearded man turned his sights to the artificial island—now right before their eyes.

It looked less like an island and more like a kilometers-long fortress.

Though there was supposedly soil on the island, on the outside it looked mostly like a mass of metal and concrete. The buildings got taller as they neared the island center, lending the structure the look of a mountain peak.

There were several vessels floating in the area, but for some reason there was no human presence.

Several massive wind turbines had been built on the edge of the island to provide electricity. They spun elegantly against the ocean breeze.

"The country was stable again after that, but you know what I think? All the aftereffects and shit went to that island over there."

The bearded man finally went silent.

"So that's when a bunch of punks and hobos got together to make themselves a little slice of heaven." Hayato said.

"Right. Would've been nice if they could have sent in an army or something to clean up the place, but no one had the time and energy to spare back then. But then again, look at the sorry place. How would we know what's happening behind the scenes? Whatever happened, what's important here is that I lost my job thanks to the mess."

"Right. What do they do 'bout water up there?"

"Purified sea water. And as for power—see those huge-ass turbines there? They don't cover the whole shebang, but they also got solar panels to keep the place going."

The wind turbines were almost as tall as the buildings in the center of the island. They stood at least 30 meters from the island surface.

"We use tidal power too, but that's partly experimental. Wind power's a safer bet. The turbines're imported from Denmark, apparently. Over there, I hear civilians put 'em up on their property and *sell* power to the companies. Anyway, you don't need to worry 'bout power on the island. Everyone's got blowdryers, and some freaks have the latest PCs or even robots."

"Surprised it's so modern 'round here."

As their conversation drew to a close, the boat slowed. It approached the side of the island, which was a massive wall. There was a pier on sea-level—the captain moored the boat there.

The bearded man stepped off and spoke again.

“The place ascends and descends in time with the tides. Pretty sweet, eh?”

“Huh.”

Hayato was about to pass it off, when something occurred to him.

“...Ain’t the place floating anyway? Why would you need to adjust for tides?”

“If she rose and fell with the tides, sooner or later there wouldn’t be a bridge left. The island’s built to always be at a certain level with the sea. Lemme explain—”

“N-never mind. Wouldn’t get it even if you told me.”

“That so?”

The bearded man looked a little disappointed. He grabbed onto a ladder on the side of the island.

“Whaddaya know. The ladder’s primitive.”

“No complainin’, hear? This here’s supposed to be the back door.”

Leaving his friend on the boat, the bearded man led Hayato up to the island. He decided to ask a few questions as Hayato climbed after him.

“You said you were outta the country for five years. So what d’you do overseas?”

There was a moment of silence, followed by an answer below.

“Doing stuff in South America. A bit of banditry, a bit of piracy. That kinda shit.”

The bearded man froze for a moment, but soon gave a hearty laugh.

“Hah! Banditry? Like something out of a manga!”

Hayato grinned at the voice overhead and looked up at the sky.

“Pretty cool, huh?”

The scenery at the top of the ladder was, unsurprisingly, a mix of ‘in development’ and ‘ruins’.

The ground was paved just like the harbor on the mainland, and other than the occasional piles of dirt there were things like construction supplies, lead pipes, and work gloves lying around. There were buildings in the distance, but the menacing, barren world would continue until they reached them.

Hayato looked around and turned to the bearded man.

“Just a quick question.”

For the first time since he reached the island, he was the one questioning the man.

“Who’re these guys?”

Around Hayato stood about a dozen thuggish men.

They surrounded him from about 10 meters away, grinning ferociously.

As Hayato raised an eyebrow, the bearded man roared in laughter and placed a hand on his shoulder.

“Just do what they say, and you’ll come out alive.”

He gave Hayato a reassuring slap on the back.

Thick rainclouds began to slowly veil the sun and the clear blue sky.

“Hand over your goods. And your wallet.”



With the rain battering over him, Seiichi simply walked.

With Kanae's body on his back, away from their hometown—towards the artificial island.

Her body no longer moved. It was not the rain that made her body cold.

He was too late.

He was too late for everything, Seiichi chastised himself. When he ran to her, when she was shot, when they entered the bridge. Maybe he was already too late when she suggested coming to the bridge yesterday. Maybe this was her fate.

At least, Seiichi tried to steer his thoughts in that direction. But he soon found that it was impossible.

The shootout had begun so suddenly. Perhaps the thugs who were fighting the men at the entrance had aimed at the man who first spoke to Kanae. That was what Seiichi figured.

Kanae was hit by a stray bullet. It was sheer coincidence, and he was not responsible. At least, not for that split second. Seiichi was the one who had been walking *behind* her even as he declared he would protect her. Seiichi was the one who had not tried to get her home earlier. Seiichi was the one who didn't forcibly stop her when she first said she wanted to come to this place. He was guilty of so much.

At that point, Seiichi thought about himself. His girlfriend was dead, and the matter of his guilt was all he could think of.

Perhaps he didn't want to acknowledge what had happened. But it was because he already had that he was headed for the center of the bridge.

'I can't go home anymore.'

With his childhood friend's body heavy on his back, Seiichi chose to escape reality.

As he walked with despair over his shoulders, a vast land spread out ahead on the bridge. He had made it to the northwestern part of the artificial island. The entrance of the so-called city.

"You a newbie?"

"In that ruckus just now? Too bad, kid."

"From Sado, huh. Maybe you should head back."

"Just forget your problems, man. Coke?"

"Don't you be dumpin' the body 'round here."

"I'll give her a sea burial if you pay me. I don't look it, but I used to be a priest."

"I'll do it. I'm a reverend."

"Gotta be careful, kid. Freaks these days shoot anything that so much as crawls."

"C'mon, I'll give you a free syringe. It's the newest type—no needles."

The moment he set foot on the island—the city—all kinds of people spoke to him. From vagrants to punks, and even men in suits. Most saw Kanae's body and ignored him, but some seemed curious about the dazed Seiichi.

There were all sorts of reactions, from sympathy to jeering. But Seiichi ignored them all. It was partly due to fear, but it was mostly because it felt like, if he spoke to someone other than himself, he would instantly be dragged back into reality.

Without so much as a glance at his surroundings, he walked towards the center of the bridge—the center of the artificial island. The rain stopped for the moment, but thunder rumbled over the world.

A flash of light, and a roar.

A bolt of lightning struck the tallest of the buildings ahead. The light and sound brought Seiichi back to his senses.

"What...do I do?"

His voice easily escaped his lips. The juxtaposition of his thoughts to the corpse on his back was almost comedic. Rather than grief and fear at his girlfriend's death, he was feeling anxiety about his course of action.

'What do I do? What am I supposed to do? Now what? What now? What? What? What?'

He shook. A single word repeated itself in his head endlessly. An indescribable unease erased all trace of logic and reason from his mind.

Not knowing what to do or think, he stood rooted in place.

A slight stretch was all it took for Kanae's body to fall to the ground.

Seiichi straightened out, as though his burdens were completely lifted.

"Excuse me."

Suddenly, there was a voice.

Finally realizing what he was doing, Seiichi felt a pang of guilt. He stumbled upright and turned.

"Are you...all right?"

The woman had blue eyes.

Was she a mix of Asian and Caucasian? Her features were foreign to him, making it difficult to tell her exact age. She might have been about the same age as him, or maybe a little older.

'Is that...a car?'

Behind her was a black car. There was a proper network of roads on the island, good enough to rival most cities—but why was there a car on an incomplete bridge occupied by construction machinery, Seiichi wondered. At the same time, the woman came up to him.

She looked at Kanae's body.

"You were dragged into a fight, I see. ...Um...it's dangerous to loiter here. I'll take you to my place." She offered in fluent Japanese. Seiichi turned, as though trying to protect Kanae's corpse.

"Wh-who are you? Why would you want to help me?"

The woman looked taken aback, but after a moment's pause she replied.

"Because my father is in charge of this district. Don't worry—this is a duty of sorts for us. ...And I'm not heartless enough to ignore someone who needs help."

The boy standing before the corpse was an 'outsider'. His was a scene no normal local would want to involve themselves in. And yet the woman was going out of her way to offer help.

Seiichi felt as though his unease was lifted. In the streets where nothing seemed human, it felt as though he had finally met another person.

In his state, even if the woman were to offer him a suspicious contract he would sign it without hesitation.

"Th-thank you. I-I don't know what to do, and—"

"Are you from Sado Island? Is this your first time here?"

It was a strange question to be asking someone standing in front of a corpse. When Seiichi looked, he saw two suit-clad men trying to move Kanae's body to the car.

"W-wait!"

He quickly made to stop them, but the woman reassuringly took his arm.

"Let's get in the car."

Led by the woman, he approached the car. It was a luxury vehicle, one he had never seen on Sado—or Tokyo, for that matter. But Seiichi blankly walked to it as though that thought did not even register.

That was when the woman spoke again.

"About my question."

"Yes."

Though his answer was feeble, he was glad to finally meet someone he thought he could trust. Even if it was a lie he was trying to convince himself was real, Seiichi did not care. He did not care if he was kidnapped and his organs extracted, or if he was killed.

"Of course. It makes sense."

But his assumptions were proven wrong by her words. The one person he thought was 'normal' in these streets, he realized, was one of the most 'local' of any punk or vagrant he had passed.

The woman opened the car door, and turning to the boy who had just lost his girlfriend, smiled brightly.

"Welcome to this new world! We are truly pleased by your arrival."



"Welcome to the club, newbie. Nice hair."

One of the men sniggered.

Without turning, Hayato spoke to the bearded man behind him.

"I get it now. Right."

"Sorry about that. Those guys—it's not really money they're after, though they like it well enough. They just need more hands, you know?"

"You mean goons?"

The bearded man shrugged at the correction and gave a wry grin.

"Don't worry your ass off. Not like they're gonna roast you or anything."

"But—"

"It's fine! Don't sweat it! Just do what they say and the next time some poor sap gets here, you'll be standin' over there *doin'* the taking!"

Hayato looked into the sky and laughed.

"You gotta be kidding me. I ain't bad enough to be muggin' people."

A second later, his right hand emerged from behind his back, holding something.

A small black handgun with an eggshell finish.

The men flinched for a second, preparing to defend—then burst into laughter, followed by curses.

"The fuck, man?"

"Whaddaya know, we've got a real bitchin' movie star here!"

"We got a live one, folks!"

"Just kill the dumbass."

The bearded man did not understand what was going on. So he walked up to Hayato for a closer look.

And he joined the men in their bitter chuckles.

"What the hell d'you think you're doing?"

The gun in Hayato's hand was held parallel to the ground.

Like an action hero, he was holding the gun on its side in one hand.

"Heh. Looks cooler, huh?"

The men shook their heads in disbelief, snickering.

"You watched way too many movies, kid. You're never gonna hit anything with that form." The men snickered. They were convinced that the gun was a fake. Some began to draw knives and lead pipes.

"Hey, go easy on him, y'hear? Y'know what he told me on the way? Said he did some banditry and piracy in South America! Careful you don't get those sticks shoved back up your asses!" The bearded man snorted. The wry chortling turned to a hysterical roar of laughter.

"Crap, this is rich!"

"Hah! Pissin' my pants here! Hah hah hah!"

"Must've left his fucking brain back in South America!"

Yet Hayato's expression remained unchanged as he watched in silence.

As the laughter slowly died down, the men's eyes began to fill with bloodlust.

The one who had laughed first took out a large, inelegant handgun and twirled it in his palm. He was about 10 meters from Hayato—a distance most amateurs couldn't make—but the man carried himself with complete confidence.

He stopped twirling his gun and sniggered.

"Gave us a big scare, y'know? Don'cha think we *deserve* to fuck you up real good—"

"Your grammar sucks."

A gunshot.

"AAAARGH! Agh, AAAAAAAAAAAAAHHH! GAH! HAAAAH!"

Suddenly, there was a red hole in the man's thigh, followed by a dribbling spray of blood. The man dropped his gun in agony and fell to the ground.

A wisp of smoke was rising from Hayato's gun. Several men reached for their jackets and sides.

But before they could finish, yet more gunshots shook the air and blood spewed from the would-be attackers.

"Wha..."

The bearded man was flabbergasted.

The gun in Hayato's hand was still held parallel to the ground. Yet his aim was perfect.

"W-w-wait a sec. Let's calm down here, huh?"

The men holding knives and tasers stammered, staggering back at first but quickly turning tail to flee. Ultimately, the only one remaining of those still standing was the bearded man, who had missed his chance.

"Welcome to my life. Nobody understands, man."

Lowering his gun, Hayato turned to the bearded man to vent his frustration.

Though glad that he hadn't been shot, the bearded man sucked in breath anxiously.

"Tough crowd. I worked *hard* for this, y'know? You know how fucking hard it is to shoot something with the gun turned like this? I wasted tens of thousands of shots working out the kinks. The bad aim, the killer wrist pain, the gun breakages... I put *effort* into this shit! But nobody ever fucking understands. Nobody."

Hayato's tone grew darker and darker; the bearded man did not know what to say. He originally assumed that Hayato must have been angry about nearly being sold to a group of hooligans, but that was quickly proven wrong.

"Doesn't matter how hard I work—why don't you fuckwads get *blown across the damn yard*?! I put on one hell of an action scene, but you just collapse like a bunch of senile fucking stiff! Where's the *spectacle*? I wanna see you freaks fly 10 meters into the air, damn it! You never watched *Desperado*? I'm gonna lose steam if you don't live up to that much."

Hayato shook his head. Though he was nothing but a joke until a few seconds ago, his rainbow hair now looked more like the garish coloring of a poisonous animal. 'This guy is dangerous', the bearded man's instincts warned.

Hayato rambled resentfully for a time, before finally putting on the same grin as before.

"So. What I'm tryin' to say is, if they wanna make such a show of killing, I'd want 'em to be ready to make a show of *dying*, too. Don'tcha think?"

"You're the only freak who wants to make a *show* of killing." The bearded man said, quietly avoiding the question. Hayato slapped his own forehead.

"Exactly."

With that, he began to pick up the guns fallen near the collapsed men.

"To be honest, your fare was a rip-off. I gave up lunch to get on that sorry old boat. But I like my little haul of guns. Excellent customer service. And other than all the tech mumbo-jumbo, I liked your story. So I guess I'll let your prices slide."

Turning, Hayato left with one last word for the bearded man.

He headed toward the center of the island as he said goodbye.

"Thanks for the ride, man. Ah, don'tcha think you should be getting those guys to the hospital or something? The ones that're still alive, anyway."

"What the hell was that? Gunshots?" Asked the friend on the boat whom the bearded man had left behind.

But the bearded man ignored the question and leapt aboard.

"Start her, now! We're getting outta here."

"The shit?"

"Fuck! We just set a rabid dog on the loose. And we're not safe, either. We gotta get outta here. Okinawa, Hokkaido, out of the *country*, if we have to!"

Sensing something in the bearded man's expression, his friend started the boat without another word.

"Shit...shit!"

'Who the fuck was that? No, that doesn't matter. Whether Rainbow-Head dies in three minutes or climbs the ranks, there's one thing I can tell for sure.'

“Bastard’s gonna stir up *something* around him. I just know it!”

“Aw, man. The beard bastard just left his buddies.”

With a bored look, Rainbow-Head—Hayato Inui—looked at the sky.

Several buildings loomed together like mountains on the artificial island. The rainclouds covering the sky probably would not pass over the peaks. The sun began to shine on Hayato once more.

“S’probably a downpour on the other side of the place.”

As he watched the clouds, the sound of thunder rumbled in his ears—a bolt of lightning must have struck a building.

Listening to the roar, Hayato covered the brilliant sun with his hand. Several kites circled the sun as though protecting it.

The wind heartlessly scattered rain all around the patch of clouds.

“A sunshower. Fox’s wedding¹, huh?”

With a surprisingly eloquent quip, Hayato continued to walk.

“Great weather. I like a dramatic welcome.”

Snickering to himself, he slowly headed to the city.

“Though I’d have preferred a hot babe to do the welcoming.”



And so, on that day, at that hour, two people stepped into the city.

Two complete strangers, emerging from opposite sides of the island.

And though different in meaning, both surrounded by the deaths of others.

¹ In Japanese, ‘a fox’s wedding’ is a somewhat poetic term for a sunshower.

Like a pair of mirror images.



Several days later, the deepest level of the island. An area once planned as a parking lot.

It was a disgusting place.

Filled with smells, sounds, and lights that seemed to scream that there was no good to be found there.

The area was once destined to become a vast parking lot. There was no light, only the occasional intact fluorescent bulb flickering on and off.

There was a stale odor in the air and dust seemed to seep into the eyes.

Construction materials were left in messy piles, and between them were cardboard panels with so many layers that the concrete was almost obscured. Part of the clammy humidity was thanks to the rotting of the cardboard panels.

Some television shows showcased hoarders whose entire homes ended up a landfill—this place was not much different.

"I don't see anyone," said Seiichi Kugi, standing before one such mound.

Behind him stood a girl. Behind her stood six or so men in black. Each and every one was heavily built, probably with skill and strength enough to dismantle someone like Seiichi within minutes.

Though their razor-sharp gazes were trained on him, Seiichi did not seem to care.

His eyes empty of life, he simply took in the air around him.

"It's a dump," he commented. The girl smiled and nodded at his honesty.

"It is."

"This city is disgusting. I've seen almost every corner of it now, from here to the Western District. But I haven't seen a single good place."

The men behind them shot him glares again.

With their bloodlust washing over him, Seiichi quietly shut his eyes.

"I like it. It's perfect for the new me."

It had been several days since Kanae's death. There was no emotion in Seiichi's voice, and nestled in his eyes was nothing but self-hatred.

"What do you want with this city? If you want to stay—if you've decided to become a citizen—you have to do *something*. Otherwise, you'll end up just wandering the Pits."

Instead of reacting, Seiichi only said—

"I want—"

From a corner of the piles of trash, many sets of eyes fell on Seiichi.

"That girl over there—she's the Western District Boss's daughter. Just one of a bunch, though."

The leader of a group of thugs who had settled in the island's lowest level—the Pits—gave a gurgle of laughter. He stank.

"Here's your job, newbie. Watch the place. Once in a while you get shits from the Western District droppin' in, so you better make fucking sure you report that."

"Actually, Boss. Who's that kid?"

"Wha...? The skinny shit? Who gives a crap? Figuring 'im out's *your* job!"

The newbie scratched his head.

"Well, y'know, I just realized that that guy there has the same eyes I used to have. Like...like the whole world's this dark place or something. Despair—I almost know how that feels like. Hope he doesn't turn out like me."

"What the hell're you yammering about—"

"Oh, and Boss?"

By the time the newbie went so far as to cut him off, the boss was in a state of fury.

'I'll beat this sonovabitch half to death!'

With that thought, he raised his hands so his other henchmen could see. They took up their weapons and surrounded the newbie. The newbie seemed to be oblivious.

Deciding to make his move as soon as the newbie had his say, the boss quietly replied,

"Yeah?"

The newbie grinned sardonically—

"Well to be honest, Boss, you kinda stink of horseshit. Why don'tcha take a bath or something? There's plenty of seawater."

At first, the henchmen were dumbfounded. But as they began to comprehend, their faces began flushing deep red.

"And while we're at it, why don'tcha just hand over the area to me? It's frankly puny, but I'll take what I can get."

As soon as he finished, the boss howled—

"Fuck him up!"

Thirty minutes later, deep in the Pits.

The man wiped the blood splatter in a pool of salt water as he recalled the boy he had just seen through a set of binoculars.

"Man, was the kid down. And standing with a girl from the Chinese mafia with *that* face on his mug? ...Hope he doesn't turn out like me."

Wiping his face on a towel, the rainbow-haired man began to plan his next course of action.

"Man, seawater really is salty. Was the filtration system in the Eastern District? Maybe I should drop in for a one-sided negotiation or something. I should. Yeah."

With a delighted grin on his face, Hayato Inui embraced an optimistic outlook on his future.

This is gonna be fun—nah, I'm going to *make* it fun. But first I'm gonna have to take care of this stink. Let's figure out how to ventilate the place..."

一章

『クズ』



Five years later. Winter.

Chapter 1: Kuzu

Saturday afternoon, the Western District. An area once planned as an underground shopping mall.

<Ah-ah-ah—Aaahh... Testing... Ahem. How's the weather today? Clear? Cloudy? Rough? Easy on the skin? How's it feel? Who cares? Now, let's perk up with some radio dramas! Didn't get *permission* from the almighty creators, though, so if they send in swarms of lawyers from the mainland, everyone listenin' had better come say hi! Now, let's all be one big happy family of accomplices.>

An odd, mechanically modulated voice screeched from the speakers installed all around the artificial island. The city had only one radio station of its own—Sousei² Airwaves—and the voice was part of its regularly scheduled programming.

The producer probably originally imagined blue airwaves under the blue sky, but the people of the city usually called it 'Buruburu Airwaves', derived from the word 'blue'. In more recent days, they shortened it further to 'Buruburu' or 'Buu'. The radio station had hijacked the PA system that was originally intended for public announcements.

Because airwaves from the mainland reached the island, the locals were able to enjoy radio and television. Even some of the little shacks and cardboard shelters owned by vagrants were home to televisions and computers. Everyone sought whatever forms of entertainment they preferred.

But the problem with mainland broadcasts was that they did not cover information specific to the city. Ultimately, locals turned to the island's very own pirate radio for in-depth information on the bridge and the artificial island. Television and radio were the only sources of entertainment for the desperate. Those even more desperate never had the time to seek out entertainment.

But whether sought or not, the radio forcibly broadcast itself all around the island. Because the broadcasts had begun before most of the locals had moved in, and because the station generally kept the broadcasts to daylight

² *Sousei* is spelled with the characters 蒼青, the first meaning 'azure' and the second meaning 'blue'.

hours, not many were hostile to it. Most people, in fact, treated it like part of the ambience.

“Man, Mr. Kuzuhara. Can you believe we’ll be getting snow soon?”

There was a large system of streets underground. If things had gone according to plan, they would have been lined with all sorts of establishments—it would have been one of the busiest shopping centers in the city.

But because people had flocked to the former shopping areas of each district, the streets were now some of the busiest residential areas on the island. The radio broadcast was not the only source of sound. All around them, they could hear something like engines rumbling—likely the residents’ personal generators.

“Mr. Kuzuhara? Are you listening?”

“...Yeah.”

Surrounded by noise, the man called Kuzuhara nodded. He was tall with a muscular frame, and several scars were prominent on his face.

About a dozen men were following behind him. The one who had spoken first seemed to be the youngest of the group.

Put simply, the men were part of the district’s volunteer police force. But they were not public officials of any sort—they served more as private security guards.

The city was divided into multiple sections, each under the management of a different organization—a branch of a criminal syndicate, a mafia group that had drifted from China, or a gathering of immigrants. Most areas were overseen by criminal organizations, but none stood for them directly. There were even rumors that some corporations were sponsoring some of the groups.

How true were the rumors? Not even Souji Kuzuhara—the captain of the district’s volunteer police force—knew. Not only was the island too large to completely grasp, the organizations that controlled the areas shifted and changed hands every day. The larger shifts were reported by Sousei Airwaves, but that was just cold comfort.

And even if the boundary lines were redrawn, it did not affect the residents. The most impact locals felt was some inflation or deflation.

"We're gonna get more people in here once it starts snowing. Are we gonna have to clean up their mess this year? Again?"

"Enough complaining."

Naturally, snow came to the artificial island as well. Those living aboveground were forced down during that season.

"We even had to shovel snow last year. It's a pain in the ass, to be honest."

"At least we don't get as much as Sado or Niigata."

"Aw, man. You'd be surprised at how little snow Sado actually gets. It's not much different from here. And you probably think Niigata gets buried every winter cause you're from Kanto, Mr. Kuzuhara. Last year and the year before that—that's about how much we're supposed to—are you listening?"

Kuzuhara did not answer. The younger man went quiet, disconcerted by their leader's silence.

It was three years ago that Kuzuhara joined the volunteer police force. He was originally a police officer in Tokyo, but after a certain incident, he came to the island as though in escape.

As the men walked in silence, they soon heard angry shouts mixed with the radio broadcast, along with loud noises.

Finally, Kuzuhara gave an order. It was a very vague and brusque command, but the men behind him nodded gravely in unison.

"...Let's go."

About 30 or 40 people were causing a commotion at an intersection, and five or six men were running around at the center of it.

As they swore at one another, there came the sound of a bottle shattering and something sharp digging into flesh. By the time Kuzuhara and the others

arrived, the shouting had already transcended comprehensible language, and blood was splattering on the bare, tile-less floor.

Some in the very last row of onlookers noticed their arrival and raised their voices.

"Hey! It's Kuzuhara! He's here!"

"Move, make way!"

"That was damn fast..."

"Kill him!"

The commotion inflated in an instant, and the onlookers stood aside as though taking cover.

It was like they were making way for a wrestler headed for the ring. But the scene unfolding before Kuzuhara and his men was not the battle they expected, but a one-sided massacre.

Two men were already lying on the ground; four were stomping them underfoot and cursing.

Having yet to notice the arrival of the volunteer police force, the four continued to furiously trample the two.

"This isn't even a fight anymore." The youngest policeman sighed. Without even flinching at the sight, Kuzuhara strode right up to the lynching.

One of the four men finally noticed Kuzuhara and tapped his friends on the shoulders in horror.

The stomping came to an end and a hushed silence came over them.

"Whaddaya want, asshole."

The man who seemed to be the leader of the four turned, bluffing. A faint hint of fear was running through his eyes.

"Keep it down."

With that, Kuzuhara looked down at the fallen men.

Both were covered in blood from head to waist, and their noses were twisted in odd directions.

He gestured. The men waiting behind him stepped forward, took up the injured with their ragged breathing, and left.

“The fuck d’y’all think you’re doin’?”

One of the four men grabbed Kuzuhara by the shoulder and forcibly turned him around.

“You ain’t pullin’ shit—waaaaaaaaah?!”

Before the man could even finish his threat, his world was turned upside-down.

As he turned, Kuzuhara grabbed the thug by the collar, hoisted him into the air singlehandedly, and with that same momentum, threw the man to the ground.

“———!”

The man might have tried to scream; but he landed hard on his back and was left gasping for breath.

The other three flushed a deep red as they lunged at Kuzuhara, but they were beaten by the other members of the volunteer police force.

Angry howls filled the intersection, but the police restrained the men with utter calm.

Though the city had its volunteer police force, there were no legal systems. Communities like these tended to have rules of their own, but even those were fleeting and ever-changing on the artificial island.

As a result, the volunteer police force could only take wrongdoers into custody and lock them up in places like storehouses temporarily. What happened to them afterwards was for the higher-ups to decide. Some people Kuzuhara had arrested many times, and some he never saw on the streets again. Whether they disappeared to the mainland or into the sea, he had no way of knowing and no intention of finding out.

The situation was brought under control with almost tedious speed. Kuzuhara, deciding to wrap things up personally, went over to the man he threw. All that was left was to restrain him like the others—

The thug pulled out a gun as he staggered to his feet.

Quiet screams came from the crowd of onlookers, and those who glimpsed the gun first began to run. But naturally, it was the front row that first saw, and the rows further back that didn't know what was going on ended up blocking their way and causing confusion.

The volunteer police tensed as well, surprised at the weapon.

But in a different sense from the civilians.

"Th-that idiot."

"Can't believe he pulled a gun on Mr. Kuzuhara."

The policemen whispered amongst themselves, almost feeling sorry for the man.

"Die, you sonovabitch."

With ragged breaths, the man pointed the gun at Kuzuhara. They were standing only a meter apart. He couldn't miss.

Yet Kuzuhara showed no reaction. With the barest hint of a scowl, he ignored the gun and reached forward.

"Graaaaah!"

With a strange battle cry, the thug put pressure into his trigger finger.

Several gunshots resounded clearly in the underground, and the onlookers screamed and scattered. The policemen and some of the onlookers, however, remained to watch the rest unfold.

The bullets hit Kuzuhara directly in the torso. His large figure trembled at each shot, but his hand continued to reach for the man.

"G-goddammit—"

Unable to mask his fear, the thug made to shoot again. He raised the gun and held it to Kuzuhara's face to finish him off and pulled the trigger—

Kuzuhara's right palm covered the opening and caught the bullets as he grabbed the gun by the muzzle.

Then, he twisted around his wrist and easily snatched the gun with his free hand. The bullet never pierced his palm, as they were blocked by a thick black glove.

"Wh-what in *hell*?! Fightin' cheap—"

Kuzuhara's fist, still holding the bullets, smashed into the thug's face like a cannonball.

The thug's upper body was thrown back like a spring as he was slammed against the wall.

He had scarcely begun sliding down when Kuzuhara's left fist smashed into his face. The thug was snapped into consciousness by the pain. A second later, Kuzuhara pushed the tip of his boot into his neck. The thug felt as though his spine would break.

"Mr. Kuzuhara. You're gonna kill the guy if you keep going."

It was only when a subordinate spoke up behind him that Kuzuhara finally stopped.

"You all right, sir? Your gloves might be good, but I'm scared you dislocated something."

Kuzuhara made a fist with his right hand, then opened and closed it several times. The special-order gloves he wore did not allow his fingers full dexterity, but they were strong enough that the pain from the bullets did not remain.

"I'm fine."

Watching Kuzuhara restrain the thug before he even finished speaking, the policemen chatted in awe.

"Bulletproof fibers these days are incredible."

"That would've been a comminuted fracture if it wasn't Mr. Kuzuhara."

"Are your ribs all right?"

He had shaken in the instant he was hit, but there wasn't even a lingering numbness at this point. Though relatively thin, his bulletproof vest was the newest model which excelled in distributing impacts. And above all, his opponent's gun was of a relatively small caliber.

As Kuzuhara silently finished up, the newest addition to the ranks wondered out loud.

"Why don't you use a gun, Mr. Kuzuhara? I bet Kugi would be happy to get you one if you just asked."

The other policemen froze in horror, but Kuzuhara replied without much of a reaction.

"There's only two groups in Japan who're allowed to have guns. The police and the SDF."

Without even turning, he stood to leave.

Jeers and cheers alike erupted from the onlookers who had remained in spite of the gunfire.

Among them, one young man even stepped in front of him and—

"I'm your biggest fan! Could I shake your hand?"

Kuzuhara wondered what he should do, but he felt bad about ignoring the man. He lightly took his hand in a handshake. The young man talked about what an honor it was before he happily stepped aside. Kuzuhara finally left.

The policemen remaining on the scene surrounded the newbie. The thugs were still lying on the ground, and the injured had been taken to a clinic nearby. Many doctors opened shop on the island, driven out of society for personal reasons, so there was no shortage of medical facilities. Clinics ranged from decently-equipped to working-on-the-floor.

One of the policemen scowled and quietly scolded the newbie.

“What the hell kinda question was that?”

“D-did I do something wrong?”

Now that the newbie thought about it, Kuzuhara usually never went so far. He only got excessively violent—as he just had—when the opponent pulled out a gun.

“But why—”

“Hey, d’you know why Mr. Kuzuhara ended up here?”

The newbie shook his head. The others sighed.

“He used to be a cop. You know that much, right?”

“Y-yeah. There was some incident though, right? And he got fired?”

“Nah. He quit. ...Mr. Kuzuhara was in a shootout. Like the stuff you see on TV. That happens here, but almost never on the mainland, y’know? Ever heard of the Shibuya incident? Never mind if you haven’t. Important thing is, Mr. Kuzuhara was part of it. Four years ago. Dunno if the guy was a terrorist, but there was this dumbass who was collecting guns in an abandoned factory in the countryside. Shit went down, and the idiots started firing before the riot police showed.”

“Huh... I think I’ve heard of it. Didn’t a kid die or something?”

“Yeah. One of the shots Mr. Kuzuhara fired at the culprit ricocheted off the wall and hit a kid who was hiding in there to play. The culprit got shot and still got arrested alive, but the li’l explorer didn’t make it.”

The newbie remembered reading about the incident in a magazine and recalled the rest of the story. He knew that the case had only reached sensationalistic heights in the *aftermath* of the shootout.

“Talk about bad luck. Think about it. You’re fresh out of cop school, all burning up with justice and idealism, and all you did was open fire at a guy who was about to shoot a kid. But who knew your one stray bullet would end up in the kid’s head?”

“The officer—”

“Was Mr. Kuzuhara. You know what happened next, right?”

The newbie went silent. If his memory served—

The death was ultimately classified as an accident, but the officer in question and his superior went to visit the girl’s family to apologize.

At first, the parents were forgiving—things couldn’t be helped if it was an accident. But perhaps the policemen should have been on edge from the moment they noticed how the parents were smiling spite of their daughter’s death. The moment the officer and the superior bowed deeply, gunshots rang out in the suburban home in the middle of the day.

No one could figure out how the father had obtained the gun.

The superior was killed on the spot, and the officer was taken to hospital with severe injuries. Because both men were wearing suits, the family must not have known which officer was the one responsible for the death. The superior, who was sitting in the middle of the living room, ended up taking many more bullets.

“The father killed himself on the spot, and in the end, it was just Mr. Kuzuhara left alive. Maybe he was gonna keep going with cop work, even if he got a bad rap, but...he probably took the hint. So he technically resigned.”

Silence filled the street. The newbie soon spoke up hesitantly.

“Um...so Mr. Kuzuhara’s not responsible, right?”

Another policeman turned and replied,

“Like hell. It was his own fault for getting greedy and aiming for the guy’s arm instead of his head or heart. Which is why the first shot ricocheted. That’s what he said to me.”



After the morning’s work, Kuzuhara headed out for lunch.

To the outside world, the city was known as a nest of vagrants and punks. But in reality, the population had a varied mix of all sorts of jobs and workplaces. From hospitals to restaurants, general stores, and barbershops, it was like street vendors from Thailand or Vietnam had been jumbled together inside a single building.

Kuzuhara's usual haunt was Iizuka's Restaurant, an eatery next to the main intersection. In spite of being called a restaurant, its offerings consisted of mostly snacks like yakisoba and okonomiyaki—not much different from the tiny food corners next to supermarkets.

Yet business seemed to be booming. Even the foldable tables jutting out into the street were full.

"Talk about busy."

Just as it occurred to him to look for another place for lunch, high-pitched cheers erupted around him.

"Hey, it's Kuzu³!"

"Buy something, Kuzu!"

From behind he was assaulted by a flying kick. A flurry of solid punches and kicks attacked him from every other direction.

But there was no power behind any of the hits.

"Still as lively as ever."

Surrounded by children, Kuzuhara smiled for the first time that day. The children lived in the vicinity. There were about 30 of them on that street alone, and most were longtime residents of the artificial island. And naturally, some had no official records.

The group of children who mobbed Kuzuhara this time were the children of the woman who ran the restaurant.

"Lively, shmively. You gotta be dyin' of hunger, Kuzu! Hurry the hell up and buy something."

³ *Kuzu* is the Japanese word for trash.

"Let's try and keep your mouth clean, huh?"

"O-ouch! Uncle, uncle! Uncle! Ack!"

As Kuzuhara performed a Neck Hanging Tree on the oldest of the boys, a customer left the round table near the front. The children rushed over and began banging on the tabletop, shouting, "Kuzu! Kuzu! Over here, quick!" A man at the next table turned to scold them, but spotted Kuzuhara and went back to what he was doing.

"Guys, indoor voices," he warned the children. They were quiet for a moment, but quickly began chattering again as soon as he took a seat.

"Y'gotta buy, Kuzu."

"And why do I have to pay out of my own pocket to eat here?"

"Who cares? You got money, right? Give us some business!"

"For a local, you really don't know much about how harsh life can be."

As he cradled his head in his hands, the oldest boy recovered from the Neck Hanging Tree and returned.

"Koff... Dammit, Kuzu! I saw you kick some ass back there!"

"Hm?"

"I saw you! I saw you just *throw* that guy with the gun—like THIS!" The boy raved. Kuzuhara frowned.

"You were watching."

"Huh? Oh, yeah. Since before you guys came!"

"...That's not stuff you should be gawking at, okay? Whether you get dragged in and die or live, that stuff messes you up in the head. You won't grow up right."

"C'mon, it wasn't even a close shave."

"It'll shave years off your life."

Just as he tapped on the tabletop, the owner came up and hit the children on the heads with the back of her kitchen knife. Kuzuhara spat out his tea.

"Help. Me. Out."

"Wh-what the heck?! You tryin' to kill us, Ma?"

As soon as the children realized what they had been hit with, they backed away in horror.

"*Kill* you? You didn't leave me with a lot of options after you shook off my frying pan attack."

"Dammit! What kind of a parent swings a knife at her own kids, you crazy old hag!"

"*Wars* happen because people turn to violence!"

"Families are supposed to *talk* things through! I'm running away from home!"

"I'm locking myself in my room!" "*You* leave, Mom!" "Go away!"

As the children complained, the mother twirled her knife around.

"...Oh hoh. Now where did you all learn to talk like that? You ignore your mother one more time, and I'll beat you with the sharp end."

The woman glared at her children. For a mother of six, she was rather young and quite popular. She and her husband were separated—he apparently lived in a fishing boat by the artificial island.

The children scattered in terror. Kuzuhara watched them flee and turned to the woman.

"Come to think of it, I don't see Yua around, ma'am."

Yua was a girl who lived with the woman and her family. Because she was an orphan, Kuzuhara did not know much about her—other than the fact that she was about 12 years old. Her parents had apparently drifted in from the mainland, but he didn't know if she had official records back there.

After her parents were stabbed to death by a vagrant who'd come to the island, Yua had been raised at the restaurant.

"She's helping out around here like a good girl. Ah, speak of the devil. Here she comes."

The woman gestured at a corner of the restaurant. A girl was running over.

"Ah! It's big bro! Hello!"

An energetic voice came from beyond the tables. It belonged to a girl with short, neatly-cut hair.

"Hey there."

Kuzuhara had happened to be on the scene when Yua's parents were killed. He was given temporary custody of the crying girl. But being single, he could not raise her like a parent—so he left her in the care of the woman who ran Iizuka's Restaurant (who, at the time, was not separated from her husband).

"More scratches." He frowned, scrutinizing her face and arms.

"Huh? I'm just fine!"

"Did you go sneaking in someplace again?"

Yua's favorite pastime was exploration. It was a very age-appropriate hobby in one sense, but there was nothing more dangerous on the artificial island. Kuzuhara—and other adults—had tried to stop her many times. But that hobby alone she could not abandon. Ultimately, he was forced to give up—instead he scared the local delinquents into keeping an eye on her so she wasn't kidnapped or sold off.

Kuzuhara had no idea why she was so adamant on exploration, but he was almost at ease with her expeditions at this point. But—

"Yeah! I went all the way down to the bottom level yesterday. I could even see the sea!"

Pffft.

Kuzuhara spat out his tea again.

"The bottom level? You mean the Pits—"

A large chunk of the lowest level of the artificial island was a mechanical room where the island's height was controlled. The rest of the area was originally intended for parking space and storage, but today, it was a particularly dangerous part of the island. The deals that went on there made even the most seasoned of locals grimace, and there were so many drug addicts that even Kuzuhara did not go if he could help it. To be more specific, people there sold girls like Yua without even blinking.

"You know how many people are posted on watch at the entrances—"

"I found a side route! I've been looking for it *forever* but I finally found it yesterday!"

"I...y-you...i-it's a miracle you got out of there alive! Don't ever *think* of going back there! All right?" Kuzuhara raised his voice without thinking. Dejected, Yua went silent.

Some of the patrons turned to see what was happening, but they turned away and pretended not to notice as soon as they saw Kuzuhara.

"...I'm sorry."

"Guess I can't help that you already went and came back, but still... —could you talk her out of this, ma'am?" He called to the owner, who had gone back into the kitchen. But her reply came with a very final chop of the knife.

"What do you want me to do, chain her down?" She asked matter-of-factly.

"Better chained down than dead." He mumbled darkly.

Suddenly, the owner's second son returned out of nowhere with a grin.

"What use is a life spent in chains? I choose to die *free*!"

"Enough!" Kuzuhara roared. The boy took off again. "Where do they pick up these lines? It's not like they can use the internet properly."

Finally calming himself, Kuzuhara turned to Yua. She was still hanging her head.

"I'm sorry, Yua. I'm not angry anymore. Just...don't ever go back there, okay?"

"Okay!"

Only when he saw a smile return to her face did he let himself look at the menu.

"Anyway, I'll get the omelet-soba combo and a cup of oolong—"

Just as he placed his order, a monstrous noise shook the street outside.

<Ah-ah-ah—Aaahh... Testing... Ahem. How's the weather today? Clear or cloudy or rough? Who cares? We're underground; how're we supposed to know? Soooooooo...don't listen to this! Which is why I'm listening, but are *you* listening to me too, Souji Kuzuhara? Souji Kuzuhara? I know you're there, so I'd be happy if you came out but if you don't I'll just sit around here and make annoying sounds all day! For example... Time for 'chewing on wad of tinfoil'!>

A second later came the sound of something crunching, followed by a short retch and quiet sniffing.

<Sniff...sniff... You're awful. How could you trick me like that you asshole now I'm the bad guy here you sea cucumber anemone stupidest dope!>

The modulated voice belonged to the voice most familiar to the locals—the main DJ of Buruburu Airwaves.

"Wh-who the hell says 'dope' these days?"

"The DJ still hasn't learned rhyme and meter."

In unison, the other patrons turned to the source of the sound with cold sweat on their faces. But the speakers usually used by the radio station were playing a radio drama about a *pipiru*-something angel and bludgeonings. The DJ's voice was coming from somewhere else.

<Aww man, it's over nobody knows where I'm s'pposed to take out all this frustration so I decided to decide for my own decision so this is all Kuzuhara's fault you kuzu kuzu kuzu kuzu kuzu kuzu kuzu kuzu kuzu kuzu kuzu kuzu! Souji Kuzuhara, are you listening?! Until you get your butt out

here, I'm gonna slander gossip defame make scandals badmouth dis trash bedwetter—>

The locals, slowly adjusting to the DJ's ranting, lost interest.

"That's not even a DJ anymore."

"Never seen worse rhythm or style."

They followed the trail of noise to the large van in the middle of the street. It was painted a bright blue and had a black license plate and black windows. It was a moving fortress that served as Sousei Airwaves' studio and broadcast tower.

Kuzuhara tried to ignore the broadcast, but he soon became painfully aware of the other patrons' glares.

He glanced at the kitchen; the owner had a knife in one hand and a smile on her lips. The smile did not reach her eyes.

"Um...I..."

As Yua hesitated, he gave her a soft pat on the head and stood with a bright grin.

"Sorry. I'll shut that down, so could you take my order a bit later?"



When Kuzuhara approached the van, the speakers attached to its roof went quiet. Then there was a click as the door came unlocked.

Without a word, he opened the sliding door and met the van's occupant with a plain look.

"All right. So how d'you feel like getting killed?"

Inside the van were multiple computers, some broadcasting equipment, and sofas and a table arranged like a karaoke lounge. It was difficult to recognize

it as the interior of a vehicle. The windows, completely opaque from the outside, were as clear as air from within.

A woman sat on the sofa furthest from where Kuzuhara stood. She wore a tattered button-up shirt with black-and-white stripes. A pair of sunglasses with blue frames sat on her face. Her long hair was tied back in a ponytail, and there was a red bandanna tied around her head. The shirt was completely unbuttoned, revealing a blue bikini top and the woman's sensual figure.

She completely ignored Kuzuhara's threat.

"I'm wearing a bikini cause—"

"I don't care. If you're not gonna pick how I get to kill you, get out of my sight."

The woman went silent for a moment. Then the dam burst as she howled in laughter.

"Kyahahahahahahahahahaha! Heehahahahaha! Man, that's great. It's amazing! That's the Kuzuhara I know! Enough fuckin' around with that dead serious mug! I stripped down and provoked you, so I was expecting a big reaction to match! Like *blushing*, at least! Heehahahahaha!"

The beauty's howls were barely human, let alone feminine. Her true voice had a husky charm, quite different from the modulated voice that usually filled the speakers.

Shooting a chilling glare at the woman—producer and DJ Kelly Yatsufusa of Sousei Airwaves—Kuzuhara muttered coldly,

"So you choose to die. That's fine by me."

As soon as Kuzuhara stepped into the van, the door closed automatically behind him.

"Heehahaha! Aw man, aw man. Don'tcha think you're going too far here?! There's a lady sittin' in a room no one can look inside, dressed in these *rags*! C'mon, did I get your heart aflutter? Did I?"

In the blink of an eye she took on an exaggerated flirtatious streak, but Kuzuhara's narrowed eyes did not budge.

"Who the hell gets hard for someone who talks like a delusional middle schooler?"

"Not even a little bit? Aww, c'mon. You don't even have a tiny soft spot for the crazy ones? *Fushigi-chan*⁴, anyone?"

"Has it occurred to you that calling *yourself* a *fushigi-chan* defeats the whole purpose? More to the point, your *ethnicity* doesn't even match up."

"Aww. You're such a bore."

Kelly shook her head in disbelief and straightened out.

"Anyway, don't kill me, all right? Just hear me out, and I'll go right back home. Then again, this *is* my home. Nyahahahaha!"

"One more 'nyahaha' and I *am* going to kill you."

"Freedom of press! This is oppression!"

"No one trusts a reporter who drops 'freedom of press' every chance they get. And speaking of being free, can't you just forget the whole freewheeling radio business and stick to an organization somewhere?"

"Hey, remember what I always say. 'What use is a life spent in chains? I choose to die free'. Heehahahaha!"

"So your *radio's* where the local kids picked that up."

'She really does get on my nerves.'

Kelly and Kuzuhara first met when he became the captain of the district's volunteer police force. He had agreed to an interview with her on the bigwigs' orders, but even now he still did not have a good grasp on her personality.

Like the temperature and humidity, her tone and attitude changed daily. It wasn't that she suddenly became humble or childish overnight, but the way

⁴ *Fushigi-chan* is an oddball-type of character in Japanese media who behaves differently from the norms of their social group. In Kelly's case, she sometimes speaks with the male-exclusive first-person pronoun 'ore', among many other things.

she laughed or the way she phrased things fluctuated constantly. Anyone who spoke to her was guaranteed to fall into complete confusion.

"So about why I asked for you, Kuzuhara. I heard that stuff earlier. You used to be a total hotshot, yeah?"

"You've got ears everywhere, huh."

"Hyahyahah! That's my job! So let me be blunt, Kuzuhara. Y'wanna get interviewed next week?"

"What?"

"I'm—saying—that—you're next week's guest on 'Buruburu Airwaves on the Street'. Tell me 'bout the scuffle you had today, or something *bang* and *smash* and *crash*. You know what? Just spill your guts."

"No."

Kelly was talking about one of Buruburu Airwaves' mainstays, a show that was broadcast every Saturday evening. She picked out a figure from the city who had recently drawn public interest and interviewed them in person. The show was how she first met Kuzuhara.

Whenever there was trouble in the Western District, Kuzuhara became involved—mostly as the hero who stepped in to end the commotion. And each time, Kelly heard of his exploits.

As a result, Kuzuhara gained the questionable honor of being the local who saw Kelly most frequently.

"You already interviewed me. And there was nothing special about today. Is that all? If you got nothing else, I'm leaving."

"Hold it, asshole! C'mon, I'm interviewing Kugi today! Your boss! It'll be a fabulous segue. and last time you came, I was doing 90% of the talking!"

Kuzuhara's expression shifted.

Seiichi Kugi was younger than him, but he was an executive of the group that oversaw the Western District. He was supposedly romantically involved with the daughter of a central figure in the organization, and was something like Kuzuhara's direct superior. But in Kuzuhara's view, he was just a man

with decent connections. Kugi carried himself with dignity that belied his youth, had a calculating mind, and he was—above all—Kuzuhara's senior as a local on the artificial island.

"...Kugi, huh. Him aside, I don't have anything to talk about."

"I told you, that's fine!"

Kelly slapped her knee and bounced to her feet. Gesticulating wildly, she continued to struggle for her next guest.

"With your popularity, you just gotta sit there and problem solved! All lights green! It's good enough to drive the listeners insane! They'll be wrapped up in a frenzy of excitement! In this city—without using a gun—someone in *your* position—is still alive. Oh. My. God! This city's different from the mainland. My listeners don't want plain-old-Japan, they want a friendly neighborhood *hero*! You get my drift?!"

"I'm just lucky, that's all. And ultimately, this *is* Japan. Run-of-the-mill punks and drug addicts can't get their hands on guns."

"But someone shot you today. Right?"

"That's—"

"The guys with the guns weren't with any of the big organizations. They were small fry who just got here a few months ago. Dunno if they were frauds or what, but they ain't got a thing to do with the yakuza or the mafia."

"...You really do have ears everywhere. Even I didn't know that much."

"Folks outside think this city's some sorta hellhole, but that's not the truth at all. Public security's decent enough that a helpless woman *only* has a 1 in 3 chance of getting attacked when she's out alone. But we've been getting a whole lotta gun cases these days. I know you know that too."

Rather than answer the unspoken question, Kuzuhara picked at another point Kelly raised.

"More like a *whopping* 1 in 3. And that goes up to 9 in 10 once you get down to the Pits."

'Which reminds me just how lucky Yua was to get out of there.' Kuzuhara thought grimly, but Kelly grinned and shook her head.

"You're gettin' behind the times. The Pits aren't as bad as they used to be."

"What?"

"What was it now, five years ago? Even the Pits got some rules like the districts. It's safer. Doesn't compare to this area, but still. Means even tourists from the mainland or Sado can still make it out alive."

That was the first Kuzuhara had heard such a thing. When he first arrived three years ago, it was an unspoken rule that he should stay away from the Pits. But now that he thought about it, the number of people disappearing into the Pits had dropped recently.

"I'd love to invite him on the show sometime, y'know. Apparently there's some head honcho even down there. He kinda keeps the scum on a leash, if you could call it that."

"That's news to me. Who's the boss?"

Finally taking an interest in what Kelly had to say, Kuzuhara turned.

"Hayato Inui. Apparently he's a loudmouthed idiot who dyes his hair in seven colors."

"An idiot?"

"C'mon, who the hell puts seven shades in their hair? Though I've never seen him before, so I can't confirm."

"The pot's calling the kettle black. Anyway, I'm heading off now. If you call me out like this ever again, you'll get my fist knocking on your face."

"Your fault for not giving me your cell number!"

"And waste batteries talking to you?"

He immediately turned to leave, but for some reason the lock would not budge.

"Hey, your door—"

When he turned, his breath caught in his throat.

Kelly's face was right in front of his. Instead of her usual blue sunglasses, a pair of dark red eyes were staring at him. Were they colored contacts, or were they natural? Kuzuhara did not know how to react to the strange shade.

Silence drew over the moment. Kelly put on a smile completely different from her earlier grins, and leaned in close. Her lips relaxed and curled seductively as she spoke.

"You really are a strange one. The aloof Kuzuhara who walks the city, the friendly Kuzuhara who plays with the children, the Kuzuhara who despises guns, and the contemptuous Kuzuhara who scorns me. Which is the real you?"

"...What do you want? Don't you usually reserve just one face for one person?"

Normally, Kelly would have laughed off the comment. But there was something stronger in her expression that fought off the urge. She almost looked like a stranger.

"This place hasn't turned into a complete cesspool, yet it's not a true city. It's a gathering of punks and vagrants, but it can't even become completely depraved. In the end, the island is full of people who are desperate to live like they did on the mainland, as though they can't move on. This place is neither here nor there. It's cheap, and has nothing to do with freedom or corruption or order. Just like a little game of pretend. But why do you struggle so much to remain a 'somebody'? Refusing to become part of the city, and refusing to lose yourself. Why do you live so desperately?"

It was a question straight out of an anime or drama from another generation. But Kuzuhara was cowed by her grim expression.

Soon, he managed to get a hold of himself and spat anxiously.

"You're imagining things. Calling *me* desperate is an insult to people like Ms. Iizuka."

"She *is* doing her best to live, but she isn't desperate. I suppose it's like... even after you ran away to this island, you're still running."

"Stop it."

"Remember how I said I didn't know what the true 'you' looked like? I wonder...what did you look like *before* that incident?"

Kuzuhara's averted gaze snapped right back to meet Kelly's. And with the most tranquil of looks, he replied.

"I'm sorry. Please, stop this."

Kelly looked floored for a moment; then, she leaned back and stepped away, plopping down on the sofa as she put her sunglasses back on.

"Kyahahaha...oh man oh man oh man oh man! You really are a weird one, Kuzuhara."

She was back to being a loudmouthed DJ.

"Heehahahahaha! Y'know, I was totally ready to get punched out just now! You coulda killed me, y'know? But why didn't you get angry? Why'd you *apologize*! It was all my fault. I dug up your past and insulted it and laughed at it!"

Kelly was doubled up in laughter, but her palms were a little sweaty. She had probably been ready to be beaten senseless. Even as she howled she trembled ever-so-slightly.

This time, Kuzuhara was the one asking a bemused question.

"I don't get you. What the hell was that all about?"

"Welllllll, I just wanted to know more about you. I wanted to see how you'd react when I brought up that past you always try to hide! C'mon, I'm part of the press. We always want a microscopically detailed look into how heroes like you think. And I also have a policy of doing research on my guests!"

"You're really going to get killed one of these days."

"I told you before. I choose to die free."

"Now you're sounding like a middle schooler who's watched too many movies."

"You're sounding like a high school kid who thinks it's cool to act all mature."

"Sure, sure. I guess I still win out in terms of age, then."

"Huh? Wait, I lost?!"

Kuzuhara gave an annoyed sigh and turned.

Putting on an unusually calm face, Kelly said only one thing to his back.

"I'm sorry. I mean it this time."

"You don't have to apologize to me."

Without looking back, he opened the door.

"I'm ready to take all the criticism and blame for that incident. If I'd hit you earlier, that would have been like running away from it all. ...Although I guess coming here in the first place was running away, too."

Stepping outside, Kuzuhara turned just once before the automatic door closed.

He wanted to say something to Kelly as she gazed at him, but in the end he was silent.

Listening to his own stomach grumbling, he headed over to the restaurant to place his order. Several children were gathered outside the van, but they scattered as soon as he exited. If the restaurant's kids were among them, they might have swarmed him—but they did not seem to be there.

The local children tended to have pale skin, likely thanks to the fact that they spent most of their days in the underground shopping mall. There were many computers and gaming devices even in this city, and very few deliberately went up to the aboveground level or the bridge. Then, Kuzuhara realized that the relatively softspoken Yua was the most tanned of the local kids. She had probably seen more sunlight than anyone else.

At the same time, he was caught by a strange pang of emotion.

'Dammit. What the hell.'

In his mind surfaced snow-white skin even fairer than those of the children.

'When she took off the shades...I liked her for a second there.'

Unfortunately, someone had already taken Kuzuhara's seat.

The sound of his grumbling stomach was all he could hear in the packed restaurant.



Saturday evening. The Eastern District of the artificial island.

"Guess what? I shook hands with *the* Souji Kuzuhara today. Ain't it amazing?"

A man was bragging loudly in a general store-slash-ramen shop in the Eastern District, on the opposite side of the island from Kuzuhara.

The ramen shop was on a corner of the street. The food was decent, but the establishment was small. The owner stirred noodles from so close that his breath reached the counter, and sometimes hot broth splashed out of the pot and onto the customers. The reason it also doubled as a general store was because the owner also bought miscellaneous supplies when he got in touch with the island's traffickers to get ramen ingredients. The general store actually made more money than the ramen business, and on this day it just happened that one young man was loitering in one of the seats.

The owner was quietly preparing ingredients for the night's sales, but the young man kept talking to him regardless.

"I saw it right in front of my eyes. The whole shebang! I *saw* him grab those bullets in his palm, like *this*! Then he twists and throws and twists and throws!"

The young man was nondescript and had black hair. He was constantly warming something up with the turbo lighter in his hand. There was a bowl of ramen in front of him, but about half the noodles were still there.

"*The Souji Kuzuhara!* Mr. Kuzuhara himself! He really is something. He's—whaddaya call it now—right! He's got class. He's on a whole 'nother level!"

"I don't care."

"Man, why don't you understand? This is why I can't deal with old folks. ... Oh! Nobody watchin' TV? They're playing an action flick right now. Can I change the channel?"

There was a wall-mounted television in the shop. It was over 10 years old, but it played the same images as the mainland in crystal-clear quality.

"One of *your* favorites? Must be one shitty movie, then."

The bald old man who owned the store grumbled loudly, but the younger man did not seem to care.

"You gotta be kiddin' me, Mr. Take! You know what this movie is? This is the Extreme Honor 6 cable premiere! The best goddamned action movie in the world, swear to god. I went all the way to the mainland to see this baby in theaters—all five times. The shootouts are so awesome they might as put 'em in a museum. It's got *fine art* written all over it! I thought I was gonna piss myself when they launched a hundred thousand Spetsnaz knives in the opening sequence. And y'know what happens in the climax? Satellite-mounted weapons going head-to-head! Imagine that! The guy just dodges real smooth away from the lasers! It's one for the history books. And I hear this was all in-camera stunts. Not a drop of visual effects! Can you believe that?"

"Bullshit."

"You got me." The man snickered, slapping his forehead. "But it wasn't a *total* lie—they only had a *bit* of visual effects—"

"Can't believe anyone still calls 'em 'visual effects'. Even *my* generation called it CGI."

"Well, cheers to my classy old soul. D-does that mean I'm actually pretty stylish—"

"Enough fooling around. Finish your ramen and get out. ...Also, I got that thing you asked for."

The old man put a paper bag on the countertop, in front of the customer.

"Thanks, Mr. Take. I really like your bags, by the way—real sturdy."

Just as the young man's fingers reached for the opening, Buruburu Airwaves on the Street began playing on the speaker behind him.

<It's said that you arrived in the city five years ago, Mr. Kugi—>

A husky female voice escaped the speaker.

"Aw, I like this chick. Better than that birdbrained DJ."

Completely ignorant to the fact that the two were the same person, the young man began to take out what seemed to be spray cans from the paper bag. There were seven of them in total.

"So Kugi's today's guest, huh. He's some exec in the Western District, right?"

<Yes. I happened to arrive that summer, on the last day of August.>

"Huh?"

Suddenly, the young man sounded curious.

<I couldn't forget that day, even if I wanted to. It was the day I became a part of this city, as well as the day I lost my friend.>

<I was told that, just before you entered the island, there was some sort of gang conflict and you were caught in the crossfire.>

<Yes. I still remember clearly. Even though she had nothing to do with the conflict, she was hit by a stray bullet and killed.>

"Wait. Wait wait wait a second here."

"Whaddaya want now? Finish your ramen already!"

"C'mon, Mr. Take. Just gimme a sec. This is the important part."

<So the incident occurred on your way here from Sado Island, on the top level.>

<Yes. If only we'd gone through a different path, I sometimes think. But we would have been caught up in *something*, one way or another. And things haven't changed. It's been five years since then, but the city is still in a state of anarchy—>

"Man, that was a close one! Whew! SAFE!"

The young man struck a victory pose and cheered.

"Wait. Guess 'safe' is kinda rude to the girl who died. I'm just gonna take a moment of silence, so could you quiet down for a bit, Mr. Take?"

"What the hell are you going on about?!"

"C'mon, listen. He said a stray bullet hit her on the same day I decided to go a little crazy, so I was scared *I* was the one who shot her. But it was in a totally different place, so I guess it wasn't me after all."

The man closed his eyes and observed a moment of silence. Afterwards, he picked up the objects he had been warming with the lighter—several gleaming safety pins—and began to put them through the holes in his ears.

Then, he reached for the seven cans of spray-on hair dye that he had taken out of the paper bag.

"Inui, you son of a bitch! You are *not* using those things in here!"

"He kicked me out. He seriously did. Shit."

Recounting out loud what had just happened, Hayato Inui strode down the streets.

The lights on the mall's ceiling were too dim; all he could see were food stalls and crowds. On the streets where the ocean only *seemed* a world away, he continued to walk toward the view of the sea.

To his home in the lowest level of the island—the Pits.

The stairs leading down were probably planned as emergency staircases; nothing stood out save for the most essential of lights. But one of the walls was covered in graffiti, courtesy of the residents who moved in afterwards.

The images ranged from childish stick drawings to artistic pieces that might feature in a gallery. But in the darkness of the stairwell, they looked equally menacing.

<Living here, I feel as though the island has been left decades in Japan's past. It is separated from the many technological advancements and social systems of the mainland, yet it has not become a complete slum. Because there is a society of sorts here, civilians sometimes visit as tourists. Of course, if they are unlucky, they end up as I did—or my friend.>

<You mentioned earlier that this city was neither here nor there, in all respects.>

<Yes. Not only is the city incomplete, it is everywhere and nowhere at once. From an administrative perspective, it is as good as nonexistent. But that will change once the Japanese government stabilizes. If at all possible, I would like for the social system that was born on this island to someday be recognized as an independent, self-governing community. I know that this might sound rather surprising. But whatever the case, the city is currently at a crossroads. To either become a wretched hive like the Kowloon Walled City and eventually be taken down by the government, or to make Japan and the world acknowledge our potential.>

"Man, for someone who arrived on the same day as me, he's one hell of a hotshot."

Speakers were installed in the emergency stairwells as well, but they were silent; perhaps they had fallen out of repair.

So as Hayato descended, the sound of the radio slowly grew distant until it finally left his awareness altogether. Even the fluorescent lights had long stopped working underneath—still holding the paper bag, he melded into the blackness.

Remembering the last words he heard from the radio, the young man snickered.

“That’s it. This place really is neither here nor there. So it’s time to decide on a heading. Turn it into *my* kind of city. Heh heh heh... Mwa hah hah hah... Huh. There ain’t much reverb in these stairs. Not much point to laughing...”

Even his laughter disappeared into the shadows, leaving behind only silence.



The interview ended, but Kelly stopped the guest before he could leave the van.

“Um, Mr. Kugi?”

“Yes? What is it?”

Even off-air, Seiichi was extremely polite. Kelly took off her sunglasses and went up to him.

Seiichi had changed completely in the past five years. Not even his friends from Sado would recognize him at a glance. Not only had he grown taller, his features had gotten sharper as well. But his shadowy presence was unchanged from his days as a teenager.

“Could I ask one thing? It’s a personal question—it has nothing to do with the interview.”

“Of course.”

The young man smiled. Kelly chose her words carefully.

“Have you ever thought of taking revenge on the bridge and this island?”

The moment the question left her mouth, the interior of the van was wrapped up in a heavy silence.

Seiichi’s eyes widened slightly. He looked at Kelly and chuckled awkwardly.



"You are a very curious person, I see."

"Please, excuse me."

"It's all right. It's just that Kanae—the childhood friend I told you about—was just like you. Although in her case, that led to her unfortunate death... Please, take care of yourself."

With that, he reached for the door.

"Um, about my question."

Seiichi froze mid-reach, and with his back turned, answered.

"It wouldn't be logical to despise this place itself. After all, my world came to a stop on the bridge and the island. Do you understand? This place is all I have now. I will protect it at all costs."

Then, he opened the door and stepped outside. Many well-built men were on standby there, and multiple luxury cars were parked behind them.

There was a woman standing in front of one of the cars. She was Seiichi's current girlfriend Yili; half-Chinese and half-British, she was a daughter of the man in charge of the district. She met him with an affectionate smile.

Yili, Seiichi, and the men stepped into the car and left without another word.

"Man, talk about being loaded. Heehahaha! Shit, they have it nice!"

As soon as Seiichi left, Kelly returned to her usual self.

"That Seiichi bastard is one scary guy! I thought Kuzuhara was going to punch me, but this guy coulda killed me! Heehahahahahaha!"

After a howl of laughter, Kelly rifled through her contacts list. Her knees began to shake.

"Aw, dammit! Why the hell don't I have anyone to talk to at a time like this? Why the hell doesn't Kuzuhara just give me his damned number already?"



Several days later.

That afternoon, Kuzuhara was called to the office by his superior, Kugi.

In spite of the name, the office was still part of what was once supposed to be a retail district.

In terms of scale, the office was a step above the rest. The organization Kuzuhara worked for was using an entire mid-sized hotel that was on top of the shopping mall.

The hotel was originally slated to open with the bridge; even the interior had been fully furnished. It had been just several days short of being in operation. The company that owned the hotel was currently suing the government, but supposedly the proceedings were expected to drag on.

Because the organization was using the hotel without permission, it was natural that the hotel company might file a complaint. At least, that was what Kuzuhara had worried. But apparently, such problems had all already been 'taken care of'.

Until the previous day, it had seemed like snow was on the horizon; but today, the sky was completely clear, and even the wind was a gentle breeze that almost felt warm. It was partly thanks to that that Kuzuhara was convinced to take the long way around and walk through the outside, even though the office had a direct route into the underground.

He felt a little at ease when he glimpsed kites flying through the air as he walked to the building. Because all sorts of structures were around him, he could not see the sea from where he stood. Sometimes Kuzuhara wondered if he really was on the ocean.

Perhaps it was partly thanks to the season, but there were few people out and about. Although the underground was not heated, it was easier to live there than outside. That was proven by the number of people who froze to death aboveground—which was many more than below.

As he walked, mindful of his surroundings, someone called his name.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Kuzuhara."

A young man with a pleasant expression greeted Kuzuhara. It was Seiichi Kugi, an executive of the organization and Kuzuhara's direct superior.

"Mr. Kugi. Sorry I'm late."

Although Kuzuhara was older than Kugi, he treated him with the same deference he would show a superior. Some of the other members of the volunteer police force were uncomfortable with that, but Kuzuhara was used to it from his days as a police officer. But he was not a brown-noser. The real Kuzuhara never spoke unless necessary—the face he showed people like Yua or Kelly was the exception.

"The weather was so nice that I suspected you might be coming this way. And you're about on time."

With a smile, Seiichi walked into the hotel with Kuzuhara in tow.

The lobby was more than a match for that of the hotel chain's main building. One difference, however, was the fact that very few devices there ran on electricity.

The artificial island had its own power plants in the form of wind turbines and solar panels. Because electricity from the mainland had been cut off altogether, they were the only way—though illegal—to get electric power on the island. They had been built as emergency power supplies for the artificial island to begin with, and no outside force could stop their use.

However, the power they generated did not come close to servicing the entire island. Electricity was only used when necessary, like for the lights underground. So most locals modified the wiring themselves or snuck their plugs into outlets in the retail zones. Although everyone worried about when the power would go out next, the system was just narrowly maintained—partly thanks to the fact that the heating and cooling systems, which took up the most power, were not used in the least.

Seiichi buried himself in a sofa in the lobby and offered Kuzuhara a seat.

"We can talk here. It won't take very long."

Kuzuhara also sat. The sofa was so squashy he felt like he was drowning; a far cry from the cheap ones in Kelly's van.

"Could you head to the Southern District and escort Mr. Kashimura here this evening? Feel free to take three or four of your men along."

"*Here*, Mr. Kugi?"

Kuzuhara was surprised. Kashimura was a central figure in the organization that controlled the Southern District. Not only that, the relationship between the Western and Southern Districts had worsened considerably in recent days.

Recognizing Kuzuhara's confusion, Seiichi went on to explain.

"We've decided to negotiate, so to speak."

Leaning forward, Seiichi steeped his fingers and sighed.

"We'll be losing a bit of ground to them, but our focus right now is to avoid conflict wherever possible."

Kuzuhara remembered what Seiichi had said on the radio the other day.

He sought to create one overarching social order on the artificial island and the bridge, formed from a multitude of plans. Instead of separate districts being controlled by separate organizations, one group would govern the entire island. In other words, the unrecognized city would become recognized as a self-governing community.

"The boss also agrees with the plan. That's why I'd like to create an opportunity for everyone to hammer out the details together. It'll just be greetings and formalities today, but I'd like for our people to go out and escort Mr. Kashimura."

"I see. Understood." Kuzuhara replied stoically. A melancholy smile rose to Seiichi's lips.

"If this plan works, I will be able to wipe out all guns and drugs from this city. Although I have no idea how far I'll be able to enforce the ban."

Kuzuhara was silent.

"The only reason this place still bears something resembling a society is because it is populated by people who have experienced some form of self-governing social order, whether in Japan or overseas. But what about in 10 or 20 years? What of the children who are born and raised on this island? The word 'order' does not exist to them. That's why it's up to our generation to build at least the foundations of a self-governing society."

Kuzuhara's feelings on the matter were complex. While he looked forward to that idealistic future, he was doubtful if it would ever come to pass.

Perhaps Seiichi had read his mind; closing his eyes, he spoke as though to himself.

"I suppose I'm making official business personal here, but to be honest with you, I despise guns. I'm sure you feel the same way. I never want to go through that pain again, and I don't want that suffering to happen again anywhere in this city."

Kuzuhara and Seiichi knew each other's pasts. One had killed a person with a stray bullet, and another had lost a loved one to a stray bullet. Their positions in the narratives were different, but the similarities in their pasts meant they both shared a commonality.

Seiichi slowly opened his eyes and continued. There was a self-deprecating grin on his lips, and deep sadness in his eyes.

"I still see her in my dreams. Kanae stands at my bedside and looks into my face, asking me: 'Why didn't you help me?'. There's no resentment or sadness in her expression—just agony. Terrible suffering."

With each word his face contorted as though in fear. The innocence he held five years earlier seemed to linger.

"Powerlessness is a crime, Mr. Kuzuhara. You might disagree, but I believe that subjecting someone to hatred or sadness is a crime. At least, it was in my case. That was why I sought power; bringing order to this city with that power is my wish and my atonement for her. People may call me naive and unrealistic, but I can't stop now."

Kuzuhara remained silent. He was neither scornful nor sympathetic. He was merely at a loss for words.

After some time, Seiichi's expression finally returned to normal. There was something calculating yet boyishly innocent in his face.

"Please don't tell Yili. I can't have her find out that I'm still going on about Kanae. She's quite the jealous one. Heh."

He grinned, then gave Kuzuhara an order.

"In any event, I need you and several men to go to the southern dock office at five in the afternoon today."

Kuzuhara stood, bowed, and left the lobby. A cheerful voice called behind him.

"I expect a fine job out of you, Mr. Kuzuhara."



"I really don't like the feel of this, Mr. Kuzuhara. I swear we're gonna step in there and the first thing we hear's gonna be a bang." One of his subordinates grumbled.

"Enough complaining. If that happens, forget everything and run." Kuzuhara replied calmly.

Five members of the volunteer police force, including Kuzuhara, were walking through an underground passage in the Southern District. 'Underground', in this case, was still higher than sea-level. They could see the vast ocean and the distant shape of the mainland through the window at the end of the passageway.

Just like in the Western District, the people here stole extra electricity from outlets or made do with personal generators. It was nothing like a city of vagrants—just a community in a distant country.

Perhaps it was because the Southern District received more sunlight, and was closer to the passage aboveground—the people here were more tanned than the people in the Western District.

But the biggest difference was the fact that there was a surprising number of well-dressed people—people who wore trendy clothes like on television. They were probably people from the mainland or those who came and went across the bridge regularly.

Because the Southern District was closest to the city of Niigata, it was the most visited by 'tourists'—curious members of the press and young people doing their business. Kuzuhara would have been happier if such relatively peaceful scenes would be reported to the media instead of all the violence and illegal trafficking that went on every night on the island—which was, of course, embellished and provocatively exaggerated before hitting the news or magazines.

As a result, the artificial island came to have the image of a foreign slum, or the Kowloon Walled City, and they ultimately received more young people who were drawn to the image. Some sat around the city permanently, and others returned to the mainland to brag about their epic adventures. And the less fortunate lost many things.

Perhaps things were different in the Pits, but there were very few instances of murder in the Southern District. It was because Kuzuhara and the other knew that that they accepted the mission.

"Aw, man. Seriously. Even if they *don't* shoot us, they might have knives."

"Not even Kashimura would go that far."

"Says who? Him and Kugi've been fightin' over this turf for a while, sir. And Kashimura's office is way far from the streets here. If he gets us, no one's gonna hear us scream."

"...You have a point. Don't let your guard down."

Remaining tense, Kuzuhara and his team headed for the edge of the city. They were headed for Kashimura's personal harbor office, which was one of the few buildings that spanned both the aboveground and underground areas. There were almost no residences around, so only those affiliated with him would ever approach.

Kashimura was once an executive in a disbanded gang. And if Kuzuhara's memory served, he was a so-called 'clever thug', the type which rose quickly to prominence starting late in the 20th century.

There was a very good chance that they were heading straight into a trap. But if they backed out now, the negotiations would fall through and the city's future would remain uncertain. Kuzuhara wanted to make the negotiations a success, if at all possible.

Although he didn't know if he really wanted to bring order to the island, listening to Seiichi convinced him that that was the best solution. Even though he knew that the only real solution was to leave the island altogether.

"What...?"

He stopped in his tracks.

There wasn't a soul to be found in B1.

The door at the end of the corridor led into Kashimura's office. Because the passage was originally restricted to authorized personnel, it was narrower than others. This was the only way into Kashimura's office, and the other entrances had been sealed. And because Kashimura's gang had fewer members, he did not have guards patrolling the area. In other words, anyone who came to see him at the office *had* to pass through the corridor.

But Kuzuhara smelled something. Mixed with the salty sea breeze was the sting of blood.

"A-are we really gonna do this, Mr. Kuzuhara?"

Although they couldn't say with certainty that the smell was coming from the office, Kuzuhara remained guarded as he carefully approached the door.

His steps felt heavy as he walked, but he could not leave without finding out where—who—the smell was coming from. Standing at the door, he steeled himself and reached for the handle.

Click.

The door opened from the inside.

The moment he took hold of the handle, it had turned on its own and the door had opened.

Kuzuhara and the others immediately stepped back and shot threatening glares at the man who emerged.

“Huh? What? Whoa, no way! Mr. Kuzuhara! It really is you!” The man exclaimed.

It was not Kashimura’s subordinate, whom Kuzuhara had seen several times in the past.

But a flippant-looking man with rainbow-tinted hair.

Kuzuhara and the others were first drawn to the man’s garish hair. Then, reacting to the man’s greeting, Kuzuhara looked at his face. But he was a stranger. Yet he was certain that he had heard the voice before—

“It’s me! Y’know, you shook my hand the other day.”

He finally remembered. He had met the young man the previous Saturday, right after taking down a thug in the Western District. At the time, the young man had normal hair—but now, he had safety pins in his ears and his hair was an unsightly mop. But the out-of-style look reminded Kuzuhara of something.

The leader of the Pits who dyed his hair in seven colors.

Kuzuhara couldn’t be certain, but he found himself whispering the name without thinking.

“Inui...”

And his guess led to a conclusion.

“Wait, you know my name? Sweet! This is one hell of an awesome coincidence. You have no idea how great this is!”

The young man jumped into the air like a child, but Kuzuhara and the others remained on guard.

That was because the stench of blood turned into a veritable torrent behind the door, and because the rainbow-haired man left a trail of bloody footprints behind him.

"What were you doing here, Inui?"

"Just some business. Anyway, can I have your autograph?"

Though Kuzuhara was dead serious, Rainbow-Head remained as carefree as ever.

"Watch this guy for a bit." He ordered his subordinates.

"Huh? Wait, that ain't nice of ya. Did I do something wrong?"

"Never mind, just stay put."

With that, Kuzuhara stepped into the office.

He saw nothing out of the ordinary when he entered. As he followed the corridor, which was little different from the passages outside, Rainbow-Head's footprints grew clearer and clearer.

Fluorescent lights were all that lit the space. He opened a door in the building's basement.

"Ugh..."

Kuzuhara did not react to many things, but this time he could not help but grimace.

The room stank of blood to the point that he felt like he was suffocating.

Inside, the room was divided into a lounge and an office. There was a sofa of a modern design in the lounge, and a glass table.

Kashimura was sitting on the sofa, dead. There was a dark red hole in his forehead, and blood was streaming down the black leather sofa all the way down to the floor.

Many people lay dead around him, and blood was pooled everywhere. Kuzuhara knew the moment he stepped inside that there were no survivors. Every corpse was riddled with bullet holes, as though they had been on the wrong end of a machine gun.

But there was little damage to the walls or the furniture around them. It must have taken a killer of incredible talent to shoot only the people against such a large number of enemies.

When he checked, he found another corpse behind the door. The blood spread all the way to the entranceway.

It was from that pool of blood that a set of footprints began to lead outside.

“Bastard...”

Witness to a scene both ghastly and extraordinary, Kuzuhara turned where he stood and ran back.

It would not be enough to take the man into custody. They had to restrain him completely, or his entire team would be in danger. Regretting his decision to bring only four people, Kuzuhara slammed open the door leading into the Southern District corridor.

And there he saw—

“You’re late, Mr. Kuzuhara.”

The voice did not belong to one of his subordinates.

Rainbow-Head stood alone with his arms spread out.

“Son of a bitch...”

Outrage and terror came to a head inside Kuzuhara when he saw the four subordinates he had left in charge, all lying collapsed on the floor. How in the world had Hayato Inui dispatched them all so quickly? Were they even still alive?

His fists shook. Hayato grinned.

“Man, these guys *almost* scared the crap outta me. They just tried to push me to the ground out of nowhere, y’know? Before I knew it, my hand just slipped and went for justified self-defense.”

There was nothing different about the way the man spoke, but Kuzuhara knew it was all an act. Behind Hayato’s affable grin was a scrutinizing gaze.

"Heh. Don't get all worked up, now. I mighta popped their shoulders, but they're all just out cold."

Kuzuhara found himself glancing down at his men. They were all unconscious, but they all seemed to be breathing. Normally, this would be the moment he lunged at his foe—but this time, Kuzuhara could not charge in heedlessly.

His four subordinates were not unskilled—they had joined the volunteer police force for a reason.

Yet in less than three minutes they were all lying on the ground, without so much as bleeding. Was the rainbow-haired man talented at martial arts? Or did he have a taser on him? From the grisly scene inside the room, it made the most sense to assume that he had a gun.

Growing furious, Kuzuhara began to probe for answers.

"...The mess in the room. Your work?"

The man's expression changed. The smile remained plastered on his face, but the affable tint was gone. A bloodthirsty, sadistic color rose to the grin, like something had surfaced from within his eyes.

Hayato slapped himself on the forehead and dramatically struck a surprised pose.

"Aww, man. This ain't good. So you got me. What to do? I could've just called it self-defense before, but now am I just gonna get arrested on the spot? *Me*, the *suspect*? I'm in a load of trouble now. I don't wanna fight you, Mr. Kuzuhara...so I guess I should make like a banana and *split*."

Hayato rambled lackadaisically to the end. Kuzuhara clenched his fists.

But a second later, Hayato did something strange.

He opened the window beside him and jumped onto the frame.

"What's the world record for a high dive? Gotta be at least 30 meters."

The corridor they were in jutted out of the southern side of the island. Underneath them was a deep, deep sea. There were fences around the

windows on the main corridors, which were originally intended to receive visitors, but these corridors were restricted to authorized personnel. The window was simply a square hole with a view of the ocean.

"Twenty-four meters from here to the waves. Didja know that? ...Won't be beating any records, but wanna give it a shot?"

And a second later, Hayato threw himself outside without hesitation.

He must have been planning to jump as soon as Kuzuhara made a move. But even a water landing could be fatal from that height. Even knowing that, Hayato leapt off like he was simply letting go of a horizontal bar.

There was even a relaxed grin on his face as he fell back-first from the window.

'Wanted to chat a bit longer with Mr. Kuzuhara, but I guess I don't have much of a choice. Wish I'd said something cooler before I left. ...Damn it, "And I would've gotten away with it if it weren't for you meddling twerps!" is all I got.'

Hayato had completely let his guard down. It wasn't his first time making a getaway like this, and he had never been caught before he made the jump.

But he had made one big mistake.

Though he respected him, Hayato had underestimated Souji Kuzuhara.

There was a heavy impact.

It was just as Hayato's body had fully escaped the window—left the island and begun freefalling into the sea.

When he spread his limbs, he saw the sky and the window from which he had jumped.

And out of the corner of his eye, he saw the next window shatter.

At the same time, Kuzuhara leapt outside—his arms covering his face and neck.

Hayato's eyes turned to dinner plates as he slapped himself.

"Not good!"

He fell with his hand still on his forehead, but the grin never left his face.

'I can start swimming the second I fall, and I'm used to swimming with my clothes on. Sorry, Mr. Kuzuhara, but you're not gonna make it. I jumped faster than—'

At that point, his thoughts came grinding to a halt.

Though he had jumped later, Kuzuhara was rapidly closing the distance between them. Even though they had jumped from different places, he was headed straight for Hayato. In other words, even though he was falling diagonally, Kuzuhara was falling faster. The fury in his eyes had given way to ice.

Hayato realized what had happened.

'Shit! He kicked off the window frame!'

The moment his body left the window, Kuzuhara had pushed himself from the frame and forcibly accelerated his fall.

Watching Kuzuhara's hand draw near, Hayato blanked out—then, he broke into a grin.

With cold sweat running down his face, he raised his voice like a child seeing an action hero in person.

"Damn, that's awesome! This is why I respect you, Mr. Kuzuhara!"

Kuzuhara's reply was simple.

"Don't underestimate me."

His right arm wrapped around Hayato's neck as though performing a lariat, dragging them both into a fall.

A second later, there was a deafening noise and a spray of water—





二

章

『

夕

海

』

Chapter 2: Night Sea⁵

Yua—Yua Kirino—loved the sun.

At least once every day, she went aboveground and found a solitary place to bask in the light.

There was soil on parts of the artificial island, and there were even a few trees and patches of grass placed for the visitors' pleasure. From the fact that work had come this far, it was easy to see that the island and the bridge had been very close to completion when they were abandoned.

But Yua had no interest in such fleeting imitations.

Only by experiencing the greatest expression of nature she could find on the island—in other words, the sun—did Yua feel with her very skin that she was part of a very, very vast world.

As usual, the sea and the sky and the sun were the sea and the sky and the sun.

Though the city was always moving in a frenzy, the sun always remained large and steady. So Yua once again took in its light.

She did not dislike the island, though. In fact, she loved it almost as much as she loved the sun. The city changed at a dizzying pace and was inhabited by all sorts of people. Yua had lived there for as long as she could remember; she knew that the artificial island was growing, just like a plant. So she watched the city grow as though watching over a sprout.

The first time she saw the island, it had simply been a flat piece of land. She still remembered that snapshot, which she saw from a boat as she held her mother's hand.

Her father had been deeply involved with the construction of the island.

⁵ "Night Sea" is written with the characters "夕海", which is the spelling of Yua's name.

He had supposedly been one of the people who designed it. Each time the construction reached a milestone, he would take Yua and her mother to see the island.

And several years later—at a certain point in recent history—she ended up moving to the island with her parents.

She remembered that her mother had looked particularly sad, but Yua had not understood why.

They lived by an underground street, and Yua's father wandered the city every day. Sometimes, he was gone for days on end. She remembered how she and her mother both were seized by fear and loneliness on those days.

But each time, her father returned with a smile and proudly showed her something resembling a map on his PDA.

Yua had been too young to understand, but she remembered clearly that her father had looked very happy.

Apparently, Yua's father was holding her mother in a tight embrace when they were stabbed to death.

Kuzuhara had picked up the fallen PDA and handed it to Yua, saying that it was a memento.

At the time, Yua was too shaken and sad to think about it; but after she was taken in by Ms. Iizuka, she began to take an interest in the contents of the PDA.

In it was a map of the artificial island. Some of the files displayed information quite pertinent to a local like her.

Recorded in red on the original blueprints were all kinds of passages and facilities. In other words, Yua's father was trying to create a map of the unfinished island.

Because development had ceased just before it was due to open, on the island were many passages intended only to be used for construction, new buildings, corridors that were expanded illegally, and paths that ended up being blocked. No one on the island had a complete grasp on its ever-

changing structure. Not even Kuzuhara, Seiichi, or the island's oldest residents knew every last detail of the cityscape.

Yua's father had come to finish that incomplete map.

What he had once said before his death always gave her strength.

"One day, this island might be open to anyone. Then someone—anyone—has to be aware of every nook and cranny here. You see Yua, people are unnecessarily scared of the incomplete or the unknown. Someone has to shed light on this island, like an explorer...like the sun. ...Heh heh. I suppose this might be a little hard for you to understand right now."

It was indeed difficult to understand, but what her father said next had come easily to her.

"Yua, you love this island too, don't you? And when you love someone, you want to know all about them, right?"

She loved the island very much, and her father also.

And so, she continued to walk, run, climb, and sneak through the island—to complete her father's work.

It felt as though, if she learned everything there was to know about the island, she could become one with it.

She continued to learn more about her beloved father and the work he was undertaking.

When her new purpose was set, Yua slowly began to escape the shackles of grief.

And today, she again stepped into the city with a notepad in hand and the strongest and brightest eyes of anyone on the island of rabble.



Thursday evening. On the seas.

"Finally awake, son?"

When Kuzuhara opened his eyes, he saw a starry sky.

He was moving. He turned his head and looked around. He was on the deck of a boat. Waves crashed from every direction, and water splashed onto his face in time with the bobbing.

"Can you move?"

He heard a voice tinged with an accent. When he turned, he realized that he had heard the voice before.

"Oh...is that you, Mr. Iizuka?"

"Hrm."

Kuzuhara tried to sit up, breathing a sigh of relief at the fact he knew his host. But every part of his body ached—especially his shoulders and neck—as though a snake was writhing inside him.

He knew why he was in so much pain. He had fallen from an unthinkable height and landed in an unlikely position. He remembered that, in the aftermath of the fall, he had pulled along the unconscious Hayato and reached a nearby fishing boat.

"You climbed up on another city feller's fishin' boat, I heard. Said he'd take y'all to Ryouzu or Akamidori, but I got the radio an' took y'all in."

"I see... What happened to the other guy?"

Kuzuhara knew the answer to his question, but he had to ask.

"Got a hold of himself and took off. One of your suspects or somethin'? Don't blame me, son. If you was knocked out like that tryin' to catch him, no way in seven hells was *I* gonna get anything done."

"I see... Please, don't worry about it. Thank you, Mr. Iizuka."

"Was nothin'. Also, Rainbow-Head was fixin' to thank you. Something 'bout showin' you gratitude in person."

A question rose to Kuzuhara's mind.

'Does that mean he's going to get back at me? Then why didn't he finish me off while I was out? He could've taken care of both me and Mr. Iizuka easily.'

Instead of anger, Kuzuhara was overwhelmed with questions. But whatever the case, he could not capture Hayato now; he had to calm down and wait for the right opportunity.

At least, that was what he thought to himself—but Kuzuhara could not say if he could maintain that calm if he ever ran into Hayato. After all, he had many things to ask the rainbow-haired man.

Who in the world was he? Was it necessary to kill Kashimura and his men? Was he working alone? Why? Why did he spare the volunteer police? Where was he planning to go? Back to the Pits? What in the world did he have in store for the city? It was just one question after another.

Just as things got complicated, Iizuka came over with a meal he cooked himself.

"Least eat somethin'. You fine with crab?"

Inside the large bowl was an entire cooked crab. The savory scent of the seaweed topping the food was enough to make Kuzuhara's stomach growl, even though he had just woken up.

"Thank you, Mr. Iizuka."

The flavor of the miso soup washed over his tongue after a single sip. If a crab leg hadn't poked at his nose as he tilted the bowl toward his mouth, Kuzuhara might have ended up draining everything in one go. Finally realizing what he was doing, he picked up his chopsticks and reached for the seafood as well.

"Delicious. This is really good."

"It'd better be, since I made it m'self." Iizuka replied confidently.

Kuzuhara remembered something then—something he had been meaning to say for some time.

“Maybe you should think about going back to your family, Mr. Iizuka.”

Iizuka was the husband of the woman who ran Kuzuhara’s usual haunt. He was also the father of six and was Yua’s adoptive father.

“They’ve been getting a lot more business lately, you know. They could use an extra hand. And it’s not like the two of you had a fight or anything.”

Iizuka awkwardly scratched his face.

“Well, y’see... Look, son. I know you’re worryin’ about us, but I just can’t. No. It’s just...my head can’t sort this out. Or, you know what? It’s really all my own fault. I was the selfish one—whaddaya call it now...I just can’t face ‘em sometimes. The missus and the little’ns...It’s my own damn fault for bringin’ em all to the island, and sometimes it done scared me to look at ‘em. And before I knew it, I kept walkin’ outta the house. I know it’s wrong, and all...but it’s like a disease or somethin’. Nothing to be done ‘bout it.”

He took a long sip of miso soup, and looked up at the night sky.

“Ain’t it funny, though? Ran away from m’hometown first, an’ now I’m runnin’ from my family. Like a sorry sonovabitch.”

Kuzuhara searched for words to console the older man, but eventually gave up. He himself had come to the city in escape; he could not think of anything to say.

After eating everything but the crab shell, Kuzuhara changed the subject.

“Do you like this city, Mr. Iizuka?”

“Dunno. Maybe I’m still here cause I do. But damned if I think it’s a *good* place. If this were paradise—least someplace as good as our old place—I could look the missus in the eye.”

“...I suppose.”

“For being some place I ran off to with m’family, this island’s pretty easy to live on. If it was, ah, a shithole where folks die in front of the house every day, I’d pack up an’ leave to someplace on the mainland.” Iizuka chuckled,

embarrassed. Kuzuhara remembered what Kelly said the other day. The awkward city, neither fully depraved nor whole.

"It seems like there's nothing whole in this city after all." Kuzuhara remarked, sounding anxious.

Iizuka sucked on a crab leg and replied,

"But y'know somethin', son? The city's a right mess, but you never know what's gonna happen. Why, Sado used to be a good-for-nothin' place for exiles. Used to live there for a bit 'fore I met the missus, and well...sure was different from Niigata."

He turned to the faint lights shining in the north. The lighthouse blinked rapidly.

"What's the first thing comes to your mind when you think of Sado? The gold mines. Back then, it really *was* all the criminals an' bums swarmin' in. Whole herds of folks from all over the country, with *ideas* and *cultures* from every last corner. And see here—the island ain't much different."

Kuzuhara fell into thought. Iizuka handed him another bowl of food.

"An' in the end, Sado made a culture of its own. Partly cause some of the folks who drifted in were clever."

Boldly describing the outstanding achievements of the Muromachi-era writer-cum-actor Zeami and the Kamakura-era monk Nichiren as simply 'clever', Iizuka took another drink of miso soup.

"The city really ain't either here or there. But if you think 'bout it, that's because it's only just made. Most folks're from all over Japan. What do you get when you toss in a bunch of Japanese folks into a lawless slum? Still Japan. Y'can't just toss away your old self like that. So they went makin' a habit of following morals, as it was. Even if y'all don't know it. You're in the volunteer cops cause you couldn't let go of bein' a cop before, son. Am I right?"

Kuzuhara remained silent. Perhaps Iizuka was right; or perhaps not.

The talkative fisherman continued undeterred.

"Damn straight. All the folks on the island're outsiders. There's no rules or anything—folks just follow whatever 'morals' they got in their heads. An' what's wrong with that? The ones who really decide which way this city's gonna go—that's the little'ns here, once they're big enough."

Iizuka popped a piece of crab shell into his mouth. Several loud crunches punctuated the air, and he spat out nothing.

"Neither here nor there means it just ain't finished yet. There's a whole world of possibilities out there—look forward to that. Wait for a city that's nowhere else but on that bridge over yonder. Embrace all the good and bad, just like you'd do with any other town."

Iizuka began to munch on crab shell again. In the darkness, Kuzuhara gazed at the lights of the artificial island.

"...I suppose you must have given this a lot of thought, Mr. Iizuka."

"I watch the island from my boat every day. But the lights, see? They're always different. I just spend time staring at the thing, and you know what I start thinking? That I always end up runnin' off cause I keep thinkin' too hard."

"Your wife wouldn't be happy to hear that."

"Hey, don't be rubbing salt in my wounds."

Kuzuhara decided to push just one last time.

"Mr. Iizuka...please, go back to them. I know I'm being stubborn, but please...for Yua, if nothing else."

He bowed his head.

"You're puttin' me in a real spot here, son. But if somethin' doesn't *motivate* me, I don't think I've got the energy to go back."

After some thought, Iizuka clapped his hands together.

"I've got it! I'll head on back once I land a big one."

"By 'big', you mean—"

Kuzuhara looked on expectantly. Iizuka chortled.

“How ‘bout this, then? Somethin’ about as big as what I hauled up today—like you.”

The fisherman’s laughter echoed into the starry sky, on and on—



Friday afternoon. Aboveground, near the Northern District.

A lone girl stood in the southern part of the Northern District under the warm winter sun.

Even on the artificial island, the Northern District was known to be particularly labyrinthine.

‘Which is why I have to explore every last nook and cranny!’

Resolving herself, Yua stood in front of the stairs leading underground and took a deep breath.

There were multiple districts on the island, including the Western District connected to Sado and the Southern District connected to Niigata City. Each area was controlled by a different organization. The Northern District happened to be in the hands of a company connected to a crime syndicate from Kansai. Because it was not known to mainland police, the syndicate was partaking in all sorts of illegal activities on the island. Rumors said that they imported drugs or weapons from overseas, using the artificial island as an exchange point.

Perhaps that was why the Northern District was so difficult to navigate—very few normal people approached the area. And because the district was heavily involved with the criminal underworld, people saw it as second only to the Pits in terms of danger.

But Yua did not care. She had escaped danger many times during her explorations, but that was never enough to break her curiosity or determination. Did she have good intuition, or was she just lucky?

Aboveground, the Northern District was little different from the rest. Several buildings stood in orderly rows, and between them were lonely two-lane streets stretching into the distance.

Yua had come to the district several times in the past, but only along pre-existing paths. Halfway through, the paths deviated from the blueprints to the point that her father's map was mostly drawn over in red. Underground was even worse—construction materials like barricades or even piles of garbage stood everywhere and turned the district into a maze.

Very few people lived in the area. Sometimes, Yua only saw one person within eyeshot. That also meant that the financial transactions that took place in other districts were non-existent in the Northern District—the area was essentially the criminal syndicate's backyard.

Without sparing the pre-existing paths a glance, Yua decided to explore a different entryway.

The entrance was in an incomplete construction site, just behind a set of stairs.

"Hmm... Oh! I found it."

The gaping hole was exactly where her father's map said it would be.

Because it was hidden in the shadow of abandoned construction materials, a larger person would not be able to see the hole at all.

In the rain-rusted metal wall was an incomplete vent.

Taking hold of a handle intended to be used for cleaning the vent, Yua slipped into the blackness.

Wrapped up in thick clothes and equipped with a hard hat affixed with a headlamp, she stepped into the unknown.

Not realizing what terror awaited her ahead.



Friday evening. The Western District hotel lobby.

Seiichi was dreaming.

It was five years ago. Everything felt nostalgic.

Sitting beside him was Kanae, coaxing him into going to the bridge.

They must have been at Himezaki lighthouse, but for some reason the lighthouse looked hazy.

Everything but Kanae was out of focus.

The mountains, the sea, the grass, the houses, the shores, the bench—even the kites in the sky were distorted. They almost looked like crows.

Seiichi realized he was dreaming. Normally, he would have woken by that point. But he chose to remain, desperately trying to remember everything from before he came to the city. The familiar sights. The world he originally lived in. *Reality*.

“—chi. Seiichi, are you listening?”

Kanae shook his shoulder. In his dream, he snapped awake.

“Oh, sorry. I was just zoning out.”

His mouth moved against his will. Though he knew it was just a dream, Kanae’s voice was crystal clear.

It was not just her voice. Though the world was out of focus, Kanae’s face alone was exactly as it had been that day.

“C’mon, you have to listen! This is important.”

“Right. Sorry. Could you say that again?”

He missed it all; he wanted to listen to more of her voice. Perhaps that desire was what kept him tied to the dream.

But—

“Why didn’t you protect me?”

“...Huh?”

As if on cue, the hazy world instantly came into focus. He had thought the sky was blue, but the sun disappeared. The forest and earth around them shifted into dull grey concrete.

Before he knew it, he was standing somewhere familiar.

The northern entrance to the artificial island, lined with incomplete buildings. Where Kanae had died.

He flinched and turned.

Her face was twisted in pure agony. She stared at Seiichi without a hint of hatred or sadness.

“I’m asking you—”

Her side ruptured. A flood of red splattered everywhere, covering the bridge. Her face alone was white—even the sky and the rain began to turn a dark red.

“—why didn’t you protect me—”

Before she could even finish, her head was consumed as though exploding—
—and he woke up.

Instead of screaming, Seiichi silently opened his eyes. As though he had willed himself to return to reality. His palms were sweaty, and he could tell his pulse had quickened. And yet, for some reason, he was not anguished.

“—*why*—”

But even in reality, Kanae’s voice rang in his head. Her voice—crystal-clear even in that hazy dream—continued to crash over him in endless waves.

“—why didn’t you protect me? Why you why why why why why why why why—”

“ARGH!”

He shook his head violently to clear the voice. His consciousness finally snapped into focus.

When he looked around, he saw a woman standing in the familiar surroundings.

He was in the lobby of the hotel used as their office—this was where he had given Kuzuhara his orders the other day. He must have fallen asleep while he was resting on the sofa.

“Are you okay?” Yili asked, concerned, but he only nodded. “Were you thinking about her again?” She asked from behind the sofa. With an understanding look, Yili wrapped her arms around her boyfriend’s neck.

In her gentle embrace, Seiichi cast his empty gaze to the air.

“Thanks. I’m...I’m all right now.”

“Don’t push yourself.”

The silent flow of time enveloped their world.

In that silence, they said nothing—concealing their thoughts from one another.

Then, Seiichi’s cell phone rang.

Yili quietly pulled away and sat on the sofa opposite.

“It’s me.”

After a short conversation, Seiichi sighed loudly and hung up.

Yili looked on curiously.

“Mr. Kuzuhara seems to be all right. I’m going out for a bit.”

That was all he said. There was something relieved, yet fearful in his eyes.

Yili also looked up at the ceiling with a complicated expression. Only the fluorescent lights were reflected in her eyes amidst the darkening ornaments.



Friday night, the Eastern District. Underground.

'Talk about irritating.' Hayato Inui thought to himself in his dream.

He was in a small, old room. An action movie from years ago was playing on the TV in front of him. It was one of the DVDs he had brought with him when he left Japan.

As he stared at the image on the screen, he remembered where he was.

It was the house he lived in 10 years ago with his parents. They were in a little village in the woods near the border of a small country in South America. They only barely got electricity, but they had a perfectly comfortable life there. The language, culture, and laws were completely different from Japan's, and Hayato had to tackle that change head-on at the sensitive age of 15; but that did not particularly affect him.

Hayato had never had many meaningful relationships, even in Japan. All he needed were DVD rentals and movies and games he downloaded off the internet. And the more movies entered his life, the further he fell from reality.

His dream took place at the stage of an incident 10 years ago.

Reality broke down his door and invaded his world of fantasy.

But that reality was so cruel that it lost all sense of realism.

His dream started in the moments before the incident began.

And, considerably enough, the scene in the movie was the very one he remembered from that time.

He knew exactly what was going to happen. And he knew that no amount of struggling would change what was about to take place.

His mind was as sharp as it could be, but his body would not listen.

He could do nothing. There was nothing he could do.

In his dream, Hayato rattled off one excuse after another.

'I couldn't do anything about what's going to happen.'

The moment he came to that point, gunfire roared in his dream. The sound of destruction, so very unlike the ones he heard out of the TV. By the time he even realized that they were gunshots, it was already too late.

He heard footsteps; more than should be present in their one-story home.

The violent racket viciously clawed at his heart.

Soon, Hayato's door opened. Men dressed in what looked like unmarked military uniforms barged into his room. Holding up crude automatic rifles, they shouted at him in a language he did not understand.

In the end, Hayato could not become an action hero.

The confusion of the moment took over his thoughts. Fear took control before he could understand what was happening.

As the men held him at gunpoint, 15-year-old Hayato did simply this—tremble and desperately repeat the word 'help', raising his hands into the air.

Then, he was dragged out of his room by the men. In the dining room leading out into the front door, he saw his parents restrained against the table.

One of the men pulled out a handgun, and—

—Hayato woke himself.

Perhaps he was already used to it; there wasn't a drop of sweat on him even in the aftermath of the nightmare.

He opened his eyes because he knew exactly what happened afterwards. And because he knew that what came after was nothing pleasant.

"Awake now, kid?"

Hayato's gaze focused instantly. In the narrow restaurant was a massive wall-mounted television. On the counter in front of him was an unfinished bowl of ramen, white circles of fat congealed on the surface.

"Ah, Mr. Take. Thanks for the grub."

"Bullshit. You started snoozing before you got halfway through the damn bowl! You makin' fun of me, kid? So you prefer snoring away to eating my ramen?!"

The old man's angry shouts filled the little ramen shop on a street corner in the Eastern District. It was getting late; there was almost no one around.

"I'm not much of a snorer, though. Did I snore? Gimme a break. I completely wore myself out today walking around."

"Ever think 'bout moving that stomach of yours instead of flapping your gums?"

"Okay, okay. I'll eat."

Taking note of the veins popping on the old man's bald head, Hayato quickly slurped down the cold noodles. Then he looked up at the TV.

"Wonder if they finished showing movies on cable today."

"Who gives a damn?"

"Damn it. I wanted to see Double Beretta. The main character's this alien who fights the American military with nothing but a couple of Berettas. The whole thing makes you wonder what the producer was smoking when he approved the thing—"

"If you're done eating, get outta here!" The old man cut him off, and took the empty bowl behind the counter. "You ain't got time to be eatin' ramen here."

Hayato realized something.

"Mr. Take...you knew?"

"Enough to know those goons from the West are after you."

Hayato slowly withdrew his shock.

"Aw, shucks. Why didn't you just report me to 'em, then?"

"Not too fond of the bigwigs out West, to be honest. And...speaking as an old-timer here, even I can tell what kinda people I shouldn't be turning against me." He replied, sounding no different from usual, and began to wash the dishes. The ramen store had no set closing time, but there probably were not going to be any more customers that night. The old man was going to close up shop as soon as Hayato left.

"I see. Thanks a bunch, Mr. Take." Hayato said, and took out a tattered old bill from his wallet. "Um, do I really look that dangerous?"

"Is that even a question?"

"Uhh, that hurt. That actually hurt a bit."

The old man stopped what he was doing and took the bill Hayato was holding out.

"There's plenty of punks on these streets, but you're different. The others at least have a piece of...normalcy in them. They still have a place to put their feet. But there's something about you—you can't see around yourself. You don't even try. Sometimes you hear about ridiculous axe-murders or something on the mainland, and I bet you're the type to pull shit like that. Seems to me like you're denying the world. You're always grinning like that cause you're looking down on everything. All that bullcrap you spew is just a ruse. Am I right?"

Surprised, Hayato stared at the old man.

"What the hell are you *seeing*, Inui? You wouldn't twitch an eyebrow at killing tens of thousands, even if you *act* like an overexcited pup."

"Sharp, Mr. Take."

Hayato grinned and stood. And without even thinking about getting his change, he prepared to leave.

Preparations entailed nothing but grabbing his hat from the wall and pressing it over his head; he probably thought it was enough of a disguise.

"I'm just looking at myself, that's all. *That* me is on a whole 'nother level compared to *this* me. What should I call it...? Right. A hero. Yeah. That's it. I've always got my eyes on the me that I want to be. The world I have to be in."

"Ah, now you're really talking nonsense."

"I know that what happens in movies can never happen in real life. I know better than anyone in this whole goddamned city. Even war movies pretending to be all real don't come close to the real deal. And action flicks are out of the question."

"As if anyone didn't know that."

Ignoring the old man, Hayato changed the channel. He switched to a Hollywood movie, which happened to be reaching its climax.

The protagonist was holding a gun in each hand, parallel to the ground. He shot down the missile launched by the villain. Then came the scene where the heroine defused a time bomb with only a second to go.

"This stuff can't happen in real life. I know that better than anyone. Which is why I love movies—the world of fiction! You know what I love more than anything in this world? The heroes you see on the screen!"

Hayato sounded like a child raving about his dreams, but there was something sad in his eyes.

Finally he looked back at the old man, his eyes shining like ice.

"I don't care how many obstacles have to die. I'll do *anything* to become the ideal me. To escape this reality. I will do *anything*."

His eyes as he stepped outside were endlessly morose and sharp and deep.

Having caught a clear glimpse of his gaze, the old man nodded at his earlier evaluation of Hayato and closed shop.

As soon as he left the store, Hayato suddenly muttered to himself.

"So it's just escapism. Both me and him."

There were almost no people on the street. Unlike the Southern District, where entertainment was easy to find, or the Pits, where the time of day mattered little, this was the equivalent of a residential area. It was very often a quiet place.

Stretching on the deserted street, Hayato blushed when he remembered what he had just said to Mr. Take.

"Oh, man...crap. What the hell am I supposed to be, a shut-in? Keeping my eyes on 'the ideal me'? Sick."

Though he grumbled like a disgruntled child, his eyes were staring off into the distance.

Hayato tried to return to the Pits, but things did not go as planned.

Six people emerged like shadows from the darkness.

He did not know their faces, but their distinctive black clothes were familiar.

'Western Guard Corps.'

They were a group that escorted the executives of the West—the Chinese mafia. It was Hayato's first time encountering them up close, but alarm bells were already going off in his head. All he saw was their gait, but he could sense they were weaker than Kuzuhara, yet above the volunteer police.

According to rumors, these men were on a different level altogether from the punks on the street, and were all armed. Considering the time period, it was unlikely they were carrying nunchucks or crossbows. Likely they were armed

with guns or knives. Such rumors snowballed as they went from one person to another, giving the group their militaristic nickname of 'Guard Corps'.

As Hayato stopped and assessed his predicament, the supposed leader of the men spoke.

"Hayato Inui?"

"No."

Hayato tried to walk away; but the man easily stepped in his way.

"What's the point of asking if you already know the answer?"

"We have no intention of killing you here. That would be in violation of the agreement we have with the Eastern District."

'Which means they're going to kill me somewhere else. Christ.'

With a loud sigh, Hayato walked back into the closed ramen shop.

The men exchanged quizzical glances, but they realized that the shop had no back door. They stood their ground, waiting. Their agreement with the Eastern District prevented them from laying a hand on the district's establishments or its residents.

And from the ramen store that fit that category came two very loud voices.

"What the hell're you doing back here?!"

"C'mon, Mr. Take. There's a buncha goons outside tryin' to take me in."

"I *said* I didn't rat on you! Get out! I haven't done anything wrong!"

"No, no, no. I believe you. But I just wanted to check with you about something."

"What?"

Then, Hayato raised his voice even more, as though daring the men to hear.

"Would it be a bother if I decided to leave six or so bodies lying in front of your shop?"

“Do that, and you’ll be corpse number seven.”

There was a moment of silence. Then, the door opened.

“Looks like we didn’t make enough of an impression on your sorry ass.”

One of the men scowled and reached for Hayato’s sleeve. The other five were quite close around him—Hayato grinned.

The men were on edge, prepared to counter gunfire. So the moment Hayato quickly shook his hand, their gazes followed.

At that moment, droplets of orange liquid spewed onto their faces.

“...!”

Hayato had sprayed the liquid from his mouth, crippling the men’s eyes. As for those less affected, Hayato spat out the rest onto their faces.

Leaving the men to suffer, Hayato whistled all the way as he sprinted for the stairs to the Pits.

He tried to say at the end, ‘Thank Mr. Take you’re still alive’, but his tongue was in such a state that all he could say was something that sounded like ‘Thaaaaahhaahewaaaaaa’.

Running downstairs, Hayato stuck out his tongue all the way and gasped.

“Whaaaaaahhhaaaaaaeeee...”

His tongue was on fire. Hayato quickly regretted his actions.

‘Shit. Bit off more than I could chew with the chili oil...’

Desperately cooling off his tongue, he recounted and analyzed what must have just happened.

Finally he arrived at an answer. His face twisted into a grin.

“I get it. I get it now. So the West, nah—*Kugi*—is gonna get serious, that it?”

Embracing the darkness of the Pits, Hayato howled in laughter.

"Heh. Heh. Ahahaha! Talk about one hell of a movie. This is it. This kind of shit is what I've been waiting for! That's practically why I came to this island in the first place! Heh...heh heh... This is rich. This is what you call entertainment! But I can't just enjoy it on my own. Better help this Kugi guy have just as much fun as me. Heh heh! I'm gonna piss myself laughing!"



Friday night. The Western District shopping mall.

There was a car parked in front of the restaurant.

Kuzuhara and Seiichi sat at a corner table; the store was slowly emptying out.

"Are you all right, Mr. Kuzuhara? I was worried about you." Seiichi said, shaking his hand. Kuzuhara looked ashamed.

"I'm sorry you had to come all this way."

"There's nothing to apologize about. It was an unfortunate coincidence, that's all. But to think you would be swept up in such business..."

Seiichi must have heard the news as well. Kuzuhara was prepared, in the worst-case scenario, to be blamed for Kashimura's death. But surprisingly, there had been other witnesses on the scene. Someone testified that they saw the rainbow-haired man enter the office.

"I lost him."

"But you're still safe. Which is more than enough, considering the killer's caliber."

"You know him?"

With a sigh, Seiichi handed Kuzuhara a pile of documents.

Attached to the first page was a photo of a young man. His hair color was different, but Kuzuhara recognized Hayato Inui immediately. Under the photograph was a list of his exploits.

"Hayato Inui, 25 years old. He's a year younger than you, Mr. Kuzuhara. He was 15 when he and his parents moved to South America for business, but the family was caught up in a civil war and his parents were killed. His records cut off there for some time, but now you can easily find his name on the internet on foreign websites. He led a group of young people his own age in guerrilla warfare—or rather, banditry and piracy. In South America, he's an outright wanted man. Although not internationally, as of yet."

Seiichi's expression darkened as he continued to summarize Hayato's bio.

"No one knows why, but he came to the island five years ago and made trouble with some people from the Southern District... Incidentally, that was the very day I arrived here myself. But in any case, he disappeared afterwards, and is now considered to be one of the most powerful figures in the Pits. He seems to show up in other districts from time to time, but he has never made contact with our organization."

Kuzuhara scowled.

"In other words, he put an end to a fight that he started five years ago."

"We considered the possibility, yes. But..."

Kuzuhara took note of Seiichi's hesitation.

"No?"

After a moment's pause, Seiichi made sure no one was within earshot and spoke.

"The Northern District as well. Five executives were stationed at the heart of the district, but we lost contact with them in the midst of ongoing negotiations. It turned out they were all murdered."

Kuzuhara bit his lip, shutting his eyes.

"And that was also his work."

"Most likely. He was spotted heading down the stairs in the Northern District."

"And...he was alone then, too?"

"I'm loath to admit, but yes. I heard that he took quite a few lives during the civil war. Although those murders aren't counted officially because the side he worked for has taken over the government. The problem was that he refused to disband his group, even after the war. That's why there's a warrant out for him now."

Kuzuhara silently stared off into space. He recalled the man he encountered in the Southern District.

There was something incomparably off about the man, so different from the punks Kuzuhara dealt with daily. Behind the flippant smile was an unknown predator, lying in wait in the shadows.

'What is someone like that doing here? And if he's that strong, why didn't he lay a hand on me or Mr. Iizuka?' Kuzuhara wondered, but he quickly moved on. There was no use dwelling on a foe's motives. The important thing was to prevent him from doing any more harm. Even if Hayato's victims were criminals, Kuzuhara felt as though accepting his actions would be as good as denying his own reason for being.

"Most recently, he's been spotted heading down to the Pits via a staircase in the Eastern District. The Guard Corps has been surveying every path down since, so there's no need to worry about him escaping."

"I see."

All of a sudden, Ms. Iizuka came up to Kuzuhara.

"Have you seen Yua?"

"Hm? Maybe she's off exploring again, Ms. Iizuka."

The woman frowned anxiously.

"She said she'd be back by night today. Yua always keeps her word about the time, at the very least."

Kuzuhara stood without a word. In his head he could clearly see Yua walking through the Pits.

"Excuse me."

Trying to ignore his aching body, he stood from his seat. Seiichi looked up.

"Who is Yua?"

Kuzuhara thought to explain her story in detail, but he decided against it and gave the short version.

"She's the daughter of the woman who runs this restaurant."

"Do you have a photograph of her, by any chance?"

"I've got some."

Ms. Iizuka took out a talisman from her apron and took out several photographs. They were of her six children, her husband, and Yua—enough to stuff the talisman full.

"Right here."

Seiichi scrutinized the pictures. Then, he took out his cell phone and took a snapshot of Yua.

"I'll spread the photo to the others so they can assist in the search."

"Mr. Kugi."

Seiichi held up a hand, cutting off Kuzuhara.

"I told you before. I want to protect as many people as possible. ...That is my way of repenting."

"But—"

"At least let me do this much," Seiichi replied, putting on an unusually friendly smile. He looked almost boyish, completely different from his usual self.

Stepping out of the restaurant with Seiichi, Kuzuhara silently bowed his head.

"Please. I'm not doing this as your superior." Seiichi said, and his expression shifted. "I actually respect you very much, Mr. Kuzuhara."

"Pardon?" Kuzuhara gaped. He hadn't expected to hear that from Seiichi.

"In the beginning, I thought bringing order to this city would be impossible. But I saw you when you joined the community three years ago. Then I began to think that, maybe, change was possible. I began to think that, with effort, I could become like you."

Kuzuhara was nothing but confused at Seiichi's confession. He had no idea what he was trying to say.

Seiichi chuckled, embarrassed.

"Mr. Kuzuhara. You're more of a hero to this city than you realize. Please try to be more self-aware."

"Of course." Kuzuhara said emotionlessly. Although that was partly because he was in a rush to find Yua, it was also because Seiichi's words did not sound real in the least.

"And of course, it wouldn't do for an executive of the Western District to fail to save one young girl." Seiichi said, his face clear of emotion. Kuzuhara recalled hearing about his past.

As Kuzuhara struggled to find words, Seiichi stepped into the car in front of the restaurant, nodded lightly toward him, and slowly drove away.

The road bustling with pedestrians was a poor match for the black luxury car.

Kuzuhara sighed as he watched the car depart.

"...As if I could be some kind of hero."

He had himself run away from reality when he came to the island. But no matter how much he tried to deny it, the island itself was a part of reality. That was why he continued his thankless work. There was nowhere to hide—

therefore, he made up his mind to face reality head-on with all he had. That was all.

Gritting his teeth, Kuzuhara rushed into the nighttime streets to do his job.



Friday night. Somewhere on the island.

Yua ran.

Aimlessly through the darkened streets of night.

There was nothing chasing after her.

She was simply afraid of the strange air around her.

She was overwhelmed by a kind of fear she had never once experienced in her life.

It was different from the sadness, anxiety, and loneliness of losing her parents. This was terror diluted to its purest form.

'I'm scared. I'm scared. I'm scared.'

Nothing was enveloping her.

Yet the island, the city, the people, and the air she so loved—

—now looked for all the world like a grotesque monster.

It felt as though even the graffiti on the walls were crashing over her.

The air was heavy. The darkness squirmed like a living creature.

The flickering fluorescent lights. The rusted handrails. The garbage strewn about the streets. The old men puffing their cigarettes. The children with their umbrellas. The large mouths of the local punks, opening up in laughter. Until just yesterday, she had loved it all.

But everything changed.

As though the world had been twisted in one fell swoop.

Yua did not even know where she was running.

Though she knew the island better than anyone, she was so afraid that she found herself endlessly stumbling through unfamiliar paths. She was so blinded by terror that she could not tell that they were the same roads she had used before.

What had driven her to such a state? It had all begun that evening.

Friday evening. The Northern District, underground.

Yua found many paths through the vent in the Northern District.

The vent was surprisingly large, and even an adult could crawl through if they just fixed up the entrance. After half a day of exploring, Yua made up her mind to go in deeper.

According to her father's blueprints, there were several more corridors and rooms in the district. When she compared the area to the aboveground, she could tell that there was a space she could not enter via normal means.

Her headlamp cut through the darkness.

For some reason, she didn't encounter a single insect in the dusty vent.

The route on the blueprint was blocked with rubble. But the vent would lead her into the space beyond.

That space was an uncharted land for both her and most of the locals.

Yua could feel her heart fill with excitement. Even her father had probably never gone beyond this point. After all, the blueprint on the PDA was not marked further from there.

Heart pounding, Yua continued down the narrow path.

Her eyes shone yet brighter in the darkness, as though her parents waited beyond.

As she made her way forward, she realized she could hear voices.

Yua cautiously quieted down. She turned off her headlamp. A dim light was shining from further down the vent.

'I knew it.'

From the direction and distance, it was likely that the light was coming from an unexplored area.

But it would be a lie to say that she was not afraid.

Who in the world could be ahead, in an area people could not enter by normal means?

Slowly creeping forward, Yua finally arrived at the grille where the light was shining.

She peered into a large storage room of some sort. The ceiling was very high—the vent seemed to be very high up in the air.

If she fell, she would not survive. Yua's veins seized at the thought.

The owner of the voice moved at the bottom of the room.

Three men were surrounding one man. They were saying something, but Yua could not hear clearly from the vent.

There were many wooden crates piled up around the men, but she could not tell what was inside.

'What in the world is this place?'

Giving up, Yua thought to go further down the vent. But then—

—things changed rapidly.

A terror spanning less than 30 seconds shattered her world, her dreams, and her heart.

Yua saw the surrounded man hold out both arms. She thought he was stretching, but there was something different about the way he moved. The man's hands were down, with only his arms and shoulders stretched out.

At that moment, lumps of black slid out of his sleeves.

They fell into each of the man's hands, and the man took hold of them as he slowly raised his hands.

"Son of a bitch! What the fuck—"

For the first time, she could hear them clearly.

A moment later, a deafening burst of sound battered her eardrums.

The men surrounding the one in the middle fell, one by one. Although Yua did not know what was happening, she could see clearly that there were red holes gaping through the men lying spread-eagle on the floor.

Pools of blood began to form under their heads.

"What the—"

"You little shit!"

Suddenly, there were more shouts. Two men burst into the room and roared at the lone man. But instead of approaching, they took cover behind the crates.

Then she saw it all.

While the two men reached into their jackets, the lone man took action.

With incredible agility he leapt onto the crates and walked toward the ones where the newcomers were taking cover.

By the time they saw him coming, it was too late. The man pulled the trigger on both his guns, angling them down at his victims.

Without thinking, Yua tightened her grip on a metal railing.

A rusted lid squeaked loudly.

'Oh no!'

Yua rushed to take cover, but the man on the crates was quicker to turn.

Just before she could hide herself, their eyes met.

The man saw a terrified girl.

Yua saw a pair of icy eyes brimming with insanity.

Panic rose from underneath, even worse than when she first glimpsed the murders. Fearing that she would suffocate to death, Yua desperately forced herself backwards.

A second later, a tiny mass of death pierced the spot where her head had been a moment ago. There was a gunshot just like before, and a tiny hole was left on the vent in front of her.

"...!"

With a soundless scream, Yua spun around and ran like a dog.

The gunfire continued. She could feel vibrations from where she had been crawling just earlier.

She did not know if the bullets could pierce the bottom of the vent, but she had no time to check. Bumping her head everywhere, Yua crawled desperately through the darkness.

And by the time she finally made it out aboveground, the world had changed.

For the first time in her life, Yua had faced her own death.

The rubble around her, the buildings, and even the stairs leading into the corridors—they all looked like frightening monsters ready to devour her.

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw something stir.

"N...no!"

It was just a passing old man, but Yua could not halt the flood of terror.

"EEYAAAAAA!"

An old man looked up in surprise as a little girl fled from his presence.

Friday night. The Pits.

She was still running.

She ran desperately, with no care for her heading.

She would find shelter nowhere, Yua thought. And as she ran, her mind paralyzed, her legs finally began to tremble. At this point, she could not tell if she was simply tired or scared.

All she could do was move forward. With panic rising up behind her like a massive wave, she ran. And it was only when she could no longer run that she realized something. That the wave was coming from the city itself. When the epiphany hit, it felt as though her terror had been magnified.

And without even a destination in mind, Yua spurred her legs to force her forward.

Forward. Forward.

Because now all she could feel behind her was pitch-black darkness.

As she pressed on, it felt like the world behind her was collapsing into nothingness.

Forward. Only forward. Even if darkness was all that awaited her.

She did not know where, or how she had gotten out. As she frantically fled from her unknown pursuer she recalled a shortcut she discovered the other day. A shortcut to the Pits, which no one else knew about.

A secret path. No one else—not even the man she saw in the Northern District—would know about it. It was a way through a gap just large enough for one child, down into an unfinished elevator shaft.

However, in her confusion, Yua made a crucial mistake.

As she took the shortcut, she ended up jumping straight into the Pits.

The elevator had been abandoned in the midst of construction. The girl leapt outside. People nearby curiously examined the elevator.

She ran and ran and ran. Further and further, if even an inch further from that man—

Only when she saw the sea did Yua realize that the best way to escape the man was to flee for the mainland. But it was too late. She was too scared to go back up now.

Wasn't there any way to escape the island? Someone she could count on for help?

It was only then that Yua finally turned her eyes to the city in the Pits. In the past, her only interest was in topography—but for the first time, she felt the people and the air of the lowest level.

At the same time, the lively energy of a pedestrian's paradise reached her ears.

There were no fluorescent lamps around, but the incandescent lights on the walls and buildings, and the halogen lamps in the floor, were blinding. The halogen lamps in particular were so bright that it was harder to see with them than without.

But thanks to the lights, none of winter's chill reached her.

As people were always busy in the Pits, Yua could tell that the population density was higher here than in the shopping mall in the Western District. There were all kinds of stalls and stands lined up, but Yua did not recognize the products displayed there.

The paths themselves were not very wide, but many people were laying about. Some were snoring with the intensity of chainsaws; others did not move, giving off a putrid stink.

Last time she visited the Pits, it was the middle of the day—but it had been nowhere near as energetic as it was now.

Yua almost forgot her fear in the lively air, but she was quickly brought back to reality.

"Hey."

Someone grabbed her by the shoulder and forced her around.

There stood a bleary-eyed man in a suit. His button-up shirt was a crinkled mess, and he only had one sleeve left. There were multiple red spots dotting his exposed arm, but Yua did not understand what they meant.

"Hey."

"Y-yes!"

The man stared at the vicinity of Yua's bellybutton. She shrank back as she replied. But—

"Hey!"

"Y-yes?"

"HEY!"

"Wh-what is it?!"

"HEEEEEEEY! Hey, hey, hey! Hey hey hey hey hey hey heeeeyyyyyyy—"

"EEEEEK!"

The man's eyes spun clumsily as he crept closer. The people around them went about their business, not particularly concerned. The man was closing the distance. Although there wasn't much of a gap to close in the first place, the man drew so near that the buttons on his shirt were almost touching her nose.

Yua tried to run, but his vice-like grip remained firmly on her shoulder.

"MOM!"

Tears welling in her eyes, Yua desperately scratched at the man; but he didn't show a hint of pain as he swung back the umbrella in his free hand. He muttered deliriously as he spun it in the air.

"Help me!"

Yua managed to squeeze out a cry. Several people turned.

"Who's that?" "Which one?" "The guy. The girl's the one that got sold a while back, right?" "Nah, that one was missing an arm." "Shucks." "Stick it in already." "Someone should help her." "—was around there just now." "Oh, he was?" "Someone get him." "Man." "Cheap goods." "Hey, d'you think she's gonna die?" "Who just OD'd there?" "He's not OD-ing." "Not gonna help?" "Too lazy." "Nice." "Let's go."

The onlookers chattered as though watching a show, yet no one stepped forward to help. But the moment tears of despair fell from Yua's eyes, the crowds changed.

"He's here."

Something must have happened behind the wall of onlookers. A second later, the people made way for a lone man.

The moment the man saw what was happening, he spoke to Yua solemnly. In the halogen light, it was hard to see his face or clothes—only his silhouette was visible.

Lowering his head, he pointed at the suit-clad man.

"...Is this your father?"

Yua stared blankly. Then, as soon as she realized what the man was saying, she desperately shook her head.

"Roger that."

The figure immediately grabbed the suit-clad man by the collar and pulled him toward himself.

"Whoaaaargh!"

The man in the suit let go of Yua and brought his umbrella down at the figure's head.

"Ouch."

The figure's grip on the man's collar remained steadfast. Yet the suit-clad man did not seem deterred in the least. Even the bystanders muttered, wondering what he would do next.

"...Tch. Can't pull it off after all."

The figure suddenly let go of the man's collar and thrust his heel into the staggering man's neck.

The suit-clad man rose slightly into the air, then crumpled on the ground in a heap.

The onlookers gasped quietly. Yua swallowed.

Soon, the crowd stopped singing the figure's praises and scattered in the halogen light.

Left behind was only the man who had rescued Yua.

"Man, Mr. Kuzuhara threw the punk with *one arm*. How the hell does he do it?"

"Wait! You know big bro?" Yua cried. Her rescuer laughed.

Yua's eyes finally adjusted to the light. Squinting, she took a good look at the figure—and her breath caught in her throat.

"Jumped out of a window together, if that counts."

The man's hair was tinted in seven colors. And when he looked at Yua, his lips twisted into a grin.



三

章

『

ぶ

る

ぶ

る

電

波

』



Chapter 3: Buruburu Airwaves

Kelly had no self. She herself knew that better than anyone.

Even the name 'Kelly Yatsufusa' was a pseudonym she used for convenience's sake.

Her words, looks, expressions, and ideology were all imitations of other people, and she subtly cycled through them depending on the time and place. All her actions were lies, yet at the same time they were part of who she was.

Kelly always mimicked the characters of others. Her usual vulgar tone, the flashes of sensuality, and the mechanical face she reserved for interviews.

Although not many islanders knew, Kelly was actually the second producer of Sousei Airwaves.

The first producer was already running the show when people first began to gather on the island.

Kelly had been sold to that producer.

As a product being sold in the Pits—not even as a prostitute or anything of the sort, but as an object—she was sold to a man named Yatsufusa. She saw many wads of cash being exchanged for her being.

Kelly saw her chance during the exchange; she bolted from the spot with ease.

When she stole a backward glance, she saw the trafficker take the cash and run. That was the way of the Pits. The fools who paid lost their money. The fools with money lost. And the fools' wallets slowly thinned. It was a vicious cycle. Those blessed by money never ventured to a place like this in the first place.

Relieved, she had tried to run—but her mistake was in that she failed to realize the state of her legs after so long in captivity.

Ultimately, her great escape lasted a full 25 seconds before her long, pale arms were caught in a powerful grip. Unable to put up any meaningful resistance, she was dragged by the arms into a van.

Kelly had been ready even for death at that point, but the man in the blue shades simply explained to her about the machines in the van with a particularly amused expression.

As she listened, Kelly realized that the man was the DJ of Buruburu Airwaves.

Little by little, Yatsufusa told her things about the programming and scheduling, making no demands of her in particular. Though Kelly was confused, she decided to bide her time. Even if she ran again, she had nowhere to go; and living with this man could not be worse than living as a product.

One day, she asked him if he wasn't going to sleep with her. He laughed and replied, "I'm only into adults. Heehahaha!"

Then why in the world did he purchase her, Kelly continued to wonder. But over time she slowly learned the tricks of his trade and went on to assist him with the radio broadcast.

All she found out about him during their life in the van was his taste in women and his trademark laughter.

And one day, he died without warning.

"Heh. I'm sorry. I'd wanted to pass on my work to someone. Or maybe who it was never mattered. Heehahahahaha."

With that laugh, he died.

It was all the more difficult because Kelly had never had a chance to grow close to him.

Why in the world had he started a radio station? What was the disease that killed him? And if he didn't care who he passed on his work to, why did he spend all that money to purchase her? He had taken the answers with him to the grave.

'Did I make him happy enough for the money he paid? I didn't get a penny, but did I satisfy him enough to have earned my food and shelter?'

And it was only when she realized that she knew nothing about the man that Kelly broke down sobbing.

With her newfound freedom, she decided to continue on the radio station. For the sole purpose of finding out why Yatsufusa started it and why he loved it so much.

Just as Yua sought her father through her map-making, Kelly sought a stranger she didn't even love through the airwaves. Where else could she go, having come from the Pits?

The moment she resolved to take up her predecessor's bright blue shades, she resolved to become Yatsufusa himself. In tone, in character, and even in her expressions. She endeavored to become everything she had learned about him in that short period of time.

And so the programs of the second Sousei Airwaves DJ began, driven by neither despair nor hope.

Only the most bright-eared of listeners wondered, 'Did the DJ lose his touch?'

Time passed—

"Ah-ah-ah—Aaahh... It's over it's over it's over it's over it's over it's over it's over. It's all over. What's over? *I'm* over!"

Inside a blue van underground in the Western District was a makeshift radio studio. There, Kelly rolled on the floor and complained loudly to herself.

"Auugh, I'm gonna die of boredom! And I don't even have a guest for today! Something big finally goes down, but I can't get in touch with Kuzuhara, and all the execs say 'no comment'! Maybe I should just ask Mr. Take from the ramen shop out East or Ms. Iizuka... Or maybe I should just waste time with a drama CD..."

As Kelly irritably rifled through her store of drama CDs, she heard a small noise.

Someone must have knocked on her door.

Kelly glanced outside and spotted a child's hand. She passed it off as an Iizuka child playing a prank, but quickly realized that the hand was unusually tanned.

"Yua?"

The girl Kuzuhara once rescued was the only tan child Kelly knew of in the area. Kelly knew that she was now an adopted daughter of the Iizukas, but Yua was not one to pull impish pranks.

"Wonder what's up? Oh, maybe I should just go, 'wanna get interviewed?' Or something. Heehahahaha."

With a hearty laugh, Kelly opened the door.

"—hahaha...hah?"

Her laugh trailed off when she spotted the person kneeling next to Yua.

The rainbow-haired man held up a V-sign and raised his head.

"Are you—"

Before Kelly could finish, he pressed a gun to her chin.

The man grinned and casually introduced himself.

"Well, yeah. I'm just a passing hijacker."



Saturday evening, the Western District.

"Where are you, Yua?"

A day later, and Yua was still nowhere to be found. Kuzuhara had left his job to a subordinate and spent the whole time looking for her. But searching

without a single clue on the vast island was like torture. The volunteer police had been asked multiple times to look for missing children, but only about half the time did they find the lost ones unharmed.

Kuzuhara questioned everyone from local residents to hardened thugs, but no answer satisfied him. There was one old man who angrily testified, “this tanned girl just scampered off as soon as she looked at me”, but he also added that he didn’t even remember where she went.

Wondering if Yua had gone to the Pits, Kuzuhara began to consider—

<Good evening, listeners! It’s time for another episode of ‘Buruburu Airwaves on the Street’!>

As Kuzuhara made his way down to the Pits from the Western District, a husky female voice replaced the usual DJ’s cacophonous chatter.

“Right. Today’s Saturday.”

Kelly never did tell him who her guest was for the day, but now was not the time to be distracted.

“Wait...”

Suddenly, he stopped. Perhaps he could find Yua through the radio. Kelly knew the other districts inside-out, and she was the only one who could broadcast to the entire island. She had in the past sent out several missing persons alerts and even wanted notices. Kuzuhara had no way of knowing if she would be effective, but he had to try everything in his power to find Yua.

He turned to seek out Kelly—

—but the moment he heard the rest of the broadcast, he wondered if he was hearing things.

<Now, let me introduce tonight’s guest. Here we have a major player in the Pits who, like Mr. Kugi, dreams of uniting the city—Mr. Hayato Inui!>

<Hey there! Ah, just to make a tiny correction, I’m planning more on *taking* over the city.>

The voice matched the rainbow-haired man's.

Eyes on the ceiling, Kuzuhara sighed.

"The real deal, huh."

It felt like the graffiti on the walls were laughing at him.



At the same time, Kugi was also listening to the broadcast. When he heard the voices fill the hotel lobby, he radioed his subordinates.

"Track down the van immediately."

Then, he turned off the radio and growled indignantly.

"Hayato Inui...what's your game? How'd you get out of the Pits...?"

Seiichi had stationed six Guard Corps members at every entrance. And since very few people traversed the Pits and the underground, Hayato could not have blended into a crowd to sneak past the watch. Seiichi had not been informed that the van had gone to the Pits, either.

Hayato was mocking him through the speakers.



The interview continued in the van, which was parked in an empty lot somewhere aboveground in the Eastern District.

"...In other words, you plan to unite the city, just like Mr. Kugi?"

"Guess you could say that. But we're fundamentally different. *He* wants to tie things together with laws and councils, but I'm the total opposite. Screw the organizations! I'mma rub out every last one of 'em and everyone can

open up shop however they like. No street tax, no protection fees, no nothing."

"I can't imagine that the organizations in charge of the districts will be inclined to agree with your proposal."

"What happens to assholes who don't agree? Maybe the good street folks listenin' right now have no idea, but you organization goons might. What happens when you defy the way of the Pits—what happens when you defy *me*. Now, can anyone tell me what happened to dear ol' North and South after they decided to play the rebel?" Inui chortled. Kelly continued to question him mechanically.

"What do you mean?"

Kelly had heard about the two districts already, but she continued to coax answers out of her subject.

"I think a certain Seiichi Kugi might know best. And that's all I can say. No comment from this point on."



"He's provoking Kugi."

Kuzuhara reasoned that, after killing those who controlled North and South, Inui must be targeting Kugi.



<Have you ever met Mr. Kugi in person?>

<Maybe we passed by each other, but we never actually *met* met. But I know how he thinks. What makes him tick. After last week's interview, I dug up a lot of dirt on him.>

"Are you okay?" Yili asked, placing a concerned hand on Seiichi's back.

He was breathing feverishly, looking worse than when he woke from his nightmares. He was covered in cold sweat.

“What is this...?”

But Seiichi did not understand why he was so affected. All he could tell was that an uneasy premonition was pressing at his back.



<By ‘dug up dirt’...?>

<Dirt is dirt. I’d feel like a bully if I yammered ‘bout it on air, so I won’t, but put simply...he’s like me.>

<You’re comparing yourself to Mr. Kugi?>

<Yeah. Almost a carbon copy. But there’s a bit of a difference between us. We’re like...opposites. Mirror images.>

<I don’t quite see the resemblance...>

<Cause there isn’t one. But on the inside, me and him are the same. For example, I like movies. And I think I always wanna be the hero in those movies—action flicks especially. Living like a movie? That’s my style, y’know? Cause movie action doesn’t really exist. That’s why we love it so much.>

“That’s not like Kugi at all.” Kuzuhara frowned, his ears still focused on the broadcast while his feet ran busily through the city.

And as though answering him, Hayato spoke mockingly from behind the speakers.

<That Kugi guy’s just the same. He wants to make himself into something else. A hero complex, I guess. But I’m not gonna make fun of him, don’t get me wrong. He’s tryin’ to change the streets for the better, no doubt. But deep down, he wants to escape reality. His past, I should say.>

<Escapism, you mean?>

<Exactly. It's the same thing with me. But there's one big difference between us—I *like* reality. In fact, I *love* it. That's why I want to make it more entertaining. All for myself. In other words, I want to corner reality with fantasies. *Reality* is the one that's running scared. But Kugi's different. He's just running from reality. He hates it so much he wants to create himself a little happy place and run off there.>



"What a joke." Seiichi whispered. He got off the sofa and glared at the speakers in the lobby.

'What about me resembles him? ...It may be true that I'm running away from reality—that's something I know and have no intention of denying—but what does he think he knows? He knows nothing. A volatile terrorist like him couldn't possibly understand. We are not alike.'

<How can you be so certain?>

<I told you before I dug up some dirt on him. But y'know, since he's still using his real name, maybe a part of him *does* wanna go back to reality.>

Seiichi could feel something boiling inside.

'What is this?'

Each time he heard Hayato's voice on the radio, something he did not understand rose from the depths of his heart.

What Hayato said was something Seiichi knew well—which was exactly why he had bottled it up intentionally.

How could Hayato so easily say the things that Seiichi so wanted to deny?

<Or is this his idea of atonement? People can run from society and relationships easy, but you can't run from your memories. Kugi doesn't want *order* on this island, no siree. He wants to protect the island itself. Get rid of all the guns and indulge in his self-satisfaction and make sure the place doesn't end up like Kowloon.>

<It seems that your claims are largely subjective hypotheses.>

<Well...yeah. But for some reason, I could figure out what he's thinking. We're just too alike. I know we'll be best buddies. Hey, you listenin' to this, Mr. Seiichi Kugi?>

Crash.

Without a word, Seiichi pitched a marble ashtray from the table. It hit the bottom of the speaker and shattered, but Hayato's laughter would not end.

'What is he? What is that man?'

He saw no similarity between them. And yet Hayato claimed that they were mirror images.

The moment he threw the ashtray, Seiichi realized what was bubbling up inside him.

It was bloodlust toward none other than Hayato Inui, the man rambling on the radio.

But when he realized that fact, Seiichi became even more confused.

'Bloodlust? I...want to kill him? Why? Why should I? How has he affected me? He's a raving lunatic. He's just saying whatever comes to mind to provoke me. So why am I being provoked? This isn't anger. This is past that. I am being overcome by bloodlust. He must not exist in my world. It's either me or him.'

An obsessive thought began to stir through Seiichi's mind.

He glanced at Yili. She spoke gravely.

"I don't know how much he knows, but we can be certain that he's a threat."

She was stating the obvious. Seiichi headed for the main entrance.

"You need numbers. Why not take Mr. Kuzuhara, at least?" Yili suggested coolly.

Seiichi's response was calm. Yet his outrage lurked just beneath the surface.

"There's no need. I—I don't want anyone to see me kill him."

Yili was not particularly shocked that Seiichi was so quick to use the word 'kill'. In fact, it was Seiichi who looked surprised.

He lightly shook his head to clear his thoughts, but the bloodlust had already sunk its claws into him.

"Even if I had a good reason to take his life, I wouldn't want anyone to see. Especially not Mr. Kuzuhara."

"Do you understand what you're saying? Do you really think you can kill him on your own?"

"I don't know. But either way, I need to talk to him in person."

Sending off Seiichi as he silently left the lobby, Yili gave a soft sigh.

"Seized by his own anger. I suppose it's about time for Seiichi to leave the stage, too."

She looked up at the darkened ceiling, eyes tinged with melancholy.



"What is he going on about?" Kuzuhara wondered, finally discovering Kelly's van.

Someone had seen it go aboveground in the Eastern District.

At the same time, he had heard a disturbing rumor. That a man with seven-colored hair was walking with a tanned girl toward the Eastern District.

Running tirelessly, Kuzuhara cursed his own powerlessness.

'Even here—even after escaping—I'm still capable of nothing.'

And as though putting him out of his misery, the incident began behind the speakers.

<So, let me give one last warning. How do I put this... Right. I declare war on this city! Bigwigs of the island, you better do as I say if you don't want to end up like those poor fucks from the North and South.>

<Last? Mr. Inui, we still have a lot more time to cover—>

A second later, a gunshot filled every speaker in the city.

Kuzuhara froze, his face pale.

"Kelly... Wait. Hey, WAIT!"

A moment's silence later, Hayato howled in laughter from the radio.

<Ah-ah-ah—Aaahh, testing, testing, one, two, three. We had some scattered bloodshowers this evening. Ahem. FYI, Buruburu Airwaves is now under my control. So this is what it means to hijack a radio signal? I'll just put on a sweet tune for now, so send your feedback into the sky with every bit of ESP you can muster. Hah!>

The speakers went silent, quickly followed by upbeat ska music.

Trembling in rage, Kuzuhara leapt to the top of the stairs leading aboveground.



<Mr. Kugi, we've found the van. Eastern District, second parking lot. We don't know why, but the East's goons don't seem to be doing anything.>

“Understood. Please remain on standby.”

Receiving reports via cell phone, Seiichi headed alone to the parking lot.

The Eastern District’s leadership was even more solid than the West. If they still showed no signs of acting, they either did not concern themselves with the likes of Hayato, or—

Seiichi halted his line of thought. The East’s intentions mattered nothing.

Without a plan in mind, Kugi continued alone to the Eastern District, toward the van.

With bloodlust plain in his eyes.



By the time Kuzuhara arrived, the van was still in the parking lot. The lot was large enough for about 30 vehicles, and it was difficult to see it in the midst of trees and partly constructed buildings.

The van’s lights were off, and muffled sounds were coming from inside. It was probably the ska music that was filling the entire island.

Walking directly to the van, Kuzuhara opened the door without a second thought. With his hands wrapped in bulletproof gloves, he covered his face and pushed into the van.

He expected gunshots, but what came flying at him were two familiar voices.

“Kuzuharaaaa!”

“Big bro!”

The woman and the girl who were frozen in the back corner cried out at once.

“Kelly... Yua! Wh-what are you doing here?!”

While he was shocked at their presence, he kept his senses trained on his surroundings.

There seemed to be no one else there. Hayato must have already fled.



A little earlier.

Seiichi was in the southern part of the Eastern District. On the stairs going aboveground, he received a call from a subordinate.

<Mr. Kugi. Inui has left the van. He's headed for the northern stairwell. Shall we go after him?>

For a second, Seiichi gritted his teeth. Of all places, the target just had to choose the opposite direction.

<Oh, wait, sir. Someone's approaching the van...Kuzuhara is going for the door.>

Seiichi's bloodlust died down slightly. It would be difficult to track down Hayato once he was in the underground. And he could not easily stir up trouble in the Eastern District. A moment's hesitation later, Seiichi gave his subordinate orders.

"...I'll head for the van. Gather men at the hotel; Inui may go after the boss or Yili."

<Yes, sir.>



Lowering his guard, Kuzuhara went up to Kelly and Yua.

"You're not hurt, Yua?"

She trembled when he neared her.

"What's wrong?"

"Big bro, you're not going to shoot me or anything like that, right?"

Kuzuhara was not expecting a question like that.

"Of course not."

"And no one at the restaurant got shot, right?!"

"Huh? Did the rainbow guy threaten you? Don't worry, Yua. Everyone's safe."

Yua finally seemed relieved. She leapt into Kuzuhara's arms.

"I was so worried about you. Did the rainbow-haired guy try anything?"

"No, no! Mr. Inui saved me!" Yua said, teary-eyed.

"Listen, Yua. Inui is a bad guy. He's killed a lot of people."

"No!"

"He said so himself in the interview just now, didn't you hear? Today, he went to the Northern District and—"

Kuzuhara stopped himself there. He could not leave Yua with any more traumatizing memories, he decided, glossing over the deaths—

"No! Mr. Inui was lying!"

"Lying?"

"Listen, Kuzuhara! The whole crap with North and South was—WHOA! Not good!"

Kelly suddenly rose and locked the doors.

"Hey?"

"Talk later! Don't open the doors!"

Before Kuzuhara could speak, Kelly pulled aside the partition and slipped into the driver's seat.

He glanced outside, wondering what was happening. He saw a man walking over from the entrance.

A slender young man wearing a black suit. Kuzuhara recognized Seiichi at a glance.

"You idiot. That's just Mr. Kugi. I'm opening up."

He reached for the door.

"DON'T!"

Yua shrieked with all her might as soon as she recognized the man outside.

Kuzuhara froze. At the same time, Kelly started the van and took off just as Seiichi approached the door.

Ignoring Seiichi as he stepped back, the van left the parking lot in the blink of an eye.

Seiichi watched in a daze as the van disappeared, but quickly called Kuzuhara on his cell phone.



Inside the racing van, Kuzuhara and Yua rolled on the floor from the sudden start.

"Hold it! What do you think you're doing?!" Kuzuhara demanded loudly. Kelly hit the gas pedal and shouted back.

"Yesterday! Yua saw it! She's a witness!"

"To what?!"

"Ask her yourself! I'm gonna floor it!"

She didn't seem to have any destination in mind; Kelly was simply driving to get as far away from the parking lot as possible.

Giving up on getting answers from Kelly, Kuzuhara turned to Yua.

She was curled up and trembling.

"Are you all right, Yua?"

He placed a hand on her shoulder; Yua looked up, her eyes watering.

"Big bro...yesterday, I...I went to a warehouse in the North. And, and...I saw people die, and I...I almost got shot, too. I was so scared I ran, but I ended up in the Pits..."

Cold sweat ran down Kuzuhara's back. If things had gone wrong, Yua would have been erased from the world, not just the underground.

"I understand. But why didn't you come to find me?"

"But...I *did* go home right away! I had to tell you. I had to tell everyone back at the restaurant that we had to run away! But then..."

When Yua continued, Kuzuhara felt a chill run down his spine. It was not fear—it was the sensation of walking into something grotesque.

"I...I tried to go into the restaurant, but...the man who killed those people at the warehouse...he was talking with you! I was so scared..."

A heavy silence fell over the van. Kuzuhara said nothing as he put his thoughts in order. If Yua hadn't mistaken anything in her testimony...

Suddenly, the silence was broken by his cell phone. It was a completely waterproof model, and continued to function even after being submerged in seawater.

The sound filled the van with dread; Kuzuhara froze.

Only when the ringtone went into a repeat did Kuzuhara finally pick up and bring the phone to his ear.

"Hello."

<Is that you, Mr. Kuzuhara? It was awfully cold of you to leave me in the dust like that.>

The voice on the phone was as pleasant and affable as ever.

"...Mr. Kugi."

<Yes? What is it? Is Miss Kelly all right?>

"Yes. Yes, she is. She's driving as we speak."

<I see! That's a relief to hear. Now, please leave Inui to me. I will contact the East's leadership tomorrow and drive him into a corner. As for you, please continue your search for...Yua, was that her name?>

Kuzuhara did not know how he should answer, but he decided to carefully pry for information.

"...I've found Yua. She's with me right now."

There was a moment of silence, followed by a relieved voice. But for some reason it sounded slightly different from the usual Seiichi.

<I'm very glad to hear that. Is she unharmed?>

"Mr. Kugi. I...I heard everything."

It was too direct a statement to be called 'prying', but Kuzuhara's gambit must have worked.

For some time, Seiichi was silent. Then,

<...Mr. Kuzuhara. This is...most unfortunate.>

It was Kuzuhara's turn to shudder. The voice from the speaker definitely belonged to Seiichi, but he could not picture his face. The more he tried to visualize, the less human the image became; yet it was not even monstrous, as though something purely unknown was roiling around the phone.

And yet Kuzuhara tried to continue the conversation.

“Then Kashimura in the Southern District...was that also your doing?”

<Yes.>

Seiichi answered with surprising nonchalance. Kuzuhara could feel goosebumps form as sweat covered his palms.

“Why would you—”

<—I told you before. Powerlessness is a crime.>

With that, Seiichi slowly began to confess everything.

<The leaders of the Southern and Northern Districts weren’t particularly inclined to accept our plan. And since we had many problems between us in the past, I decided to clean up everything at once. Inui was the scapegoat I chose. I had Yili lure him out so he would run into you. But that’s when the plan went awry. Your losing him was one complication, but more importantly —Inui was supposed to claim innocence and die as a warning to anyone who would stand in our way, but instead he acknowledged the crimes he never committed and tried to use them to his own advantage.>

Seiichi sighed and continued, sounding fatigued.

<I’m not saying this to threaten you, or anything of the sort. As long as Miss Kelly has figured us out, she has the upper hand. I’m loath to admit this, but she is the most influential person on the island. Even if I tried to erase you, she would reveal everything via radio before I could get to you. I chose the wrong man to take the fall. It’s over now. But before that—I plan to destroy him at all costs.>

There was determination in his final statement alone—something that felt suspiciously like bloodlust.

“Over? What are you talking about? Your group was always a criminal syndicate, and the city’s still a complete mess. I’m not going to forgive you, but that doesn’t mean things are over completely.”

Even though he shivered at everything Seiichi said, Kuzuhara tried to keep the conversation going. Perhaps it was because of the fear that he wanted to get a clearer look at the man on the phone.

<...Remember what I told you the other evening? I respect you, Mr. Kuzuhara. I wanted to become a hero like you. It might sound childish to you, but that was something very important to me.>

Seiichi trailed off sadly, then added,

<Won't you join us, Mr. Kuzuhara? You wish for peace in the city as well. Why not lend us a hand in driving out the stench of blood from these streets? If you would overlook this incident, I can bring order to the island in three...no, *one* year.>

In spite of the tempting offer, Kuzuhara decided to confirm something first.

"...If you'd found Yua before I did...what would you have done?"

There was another moment of silence. Then, Seiichi spoke—quietly but clearly.

<I told you before. I want to save as many people as possible. And if she had to be sacrificed for that cause, so be it.>

Kuzuhara could feel the warmth draining from his own body.

"...I don't care about what your bigwigs are planning. But I will never forgive you for shooting at Yua."

<Finally, that's the Kuzuhara I know.>

"Don't take another step. I'll head over right now and give you a good smack in the face."

<I'm afraid you can't do that. After all, I...I'll end up escaping again.>

Though Kuzuhara's tone was nearly at a growl, Seiichi sounded nonchalant as he announced his departure.

"Wa—"

Kuzuhara was cut off by the dial tone as the conversation ended.



In the deserted parking lot, Seiichi put away his cell phone and looked at the sky.

"So he found out after all. I thought someone might, eventually."

Stars were beginning to shine overhead, and the biting wind chilled his exposed neck.

For a time, Seiichi stood blankly in thought. Then, he took out his phone again and called the first number on his list. The recipient picked up before a single beep.

<Seiichi?>

"Yes, Yili. It's me."

Sensing something from his voice, Yili asked quietly,

<Did something happen?>

"Thank you for everything, Yili. Thank you for pretending to be my girlfriend and making someone like me into an executive."

<...>

He briefly explained everything to her. There was a hint of surrender in his tone, and Yili also listened quietly. But then—

<All right. You're free to do whatever you please. We'll lose face to the East if we keep you as an executive, but we *can* hire you as a hitman, if you want to stay with us. And we have no idea if Kelly will disclose everything via radio immediately. I think we have room for negotiation.>

"Heh. Logical as ever. But I'll have to decline. The 'me' I want—it's no longer in this city. This wasn't the world I wanted after all."

<Self-centered as always.>

"But I just wanted to say this, Yili. We worked together for five years, using each other. And in the end, we only accomplished half of each of our goals. But still—thank you. I'm grateful to you."

And without waiting for an answer, Seiichi hung up.

And he fell into thought.

If he really had found Yua first, what would he have done? It was true that, when he spotted her in the Northern District, he shot at her without thinking. Then he could maintain his reputation and position. But was that what he really wanted?

It felt as though his means and ends had been switched around. He ran from Kanae's phantom, from reality and the past, and now he was running to protect his own reputation. Perhaps he had been finished from the moment he lost his original purpose. Or maybe he didn't have a purpose to begin with.

What was he to do? Where was he to run? And before that, what was he to run from? Seiichi was left knowing nothing.

"It's cold." He said, looking up at the sky. His cell phone rang.

Was it Kuzuhara, he wondered as he looked at the screen, but the number was an unfamiliar one.

"Hello?"

<Hey, your phone was busy for a while now. Talkin' to Mr. Kuzuhara? Or was it Miss Yili?>

Seiichi's expression changed in a flash.

"How dare you..."

<Whoa there! Who says 'how dare you' in this day and age? Talk about one hell of a romantic.> The voice chortled. It was the same one that had tormented Seiichi over the radio not long ago.

"What are you planning?"

<Well, you just kinda *used* me, but you know nobody likes being a pawn. You got me to go to Kashimura's place so Mr. Kuzuhara would catch me. And once you got your hands on me, you'd have killed me! Then you'd tell Mr. Kuzuhara I ran away or somethin', and you'd have erased the shits up North and said that I did that too. Blame it all on the dead guy.> Hayato reasoned, entertained.

Seiichi remained silent.

<But guess what! Even Mr. Kuzuhara didn't manage to nab me. To be specific, I think he wore himself out trying to keep me afloat. Heh. Talk about one hell of a hero. I seriously respect him, y'know.>

"I'm not interested in your prattling!"

<Fine, fine. Heh. You were running away again just now. You're scared people will point fingers at you and call you a villain, cause things didn't go according to your ideals. Am I right?>

Hayato's every word struck a nerve. Desperately holding back a scream, Seiichi directed his bloodlust at the man on the other end of the line.

"Where are you. How did you get this number?!"

<Weren't you listenin' to Buruburu Airwaves on the Street? Who was it now, Kanae? Y'know, I was there when she died. You remember where, right? No way you'd forget. I'll be waiting.>

"...Unfortunately, I have no reason to kill you anymore. I don't know why, but you seem to have a talent for provoking me—but I'm not foolish enough to put my life on the line to fight you now that my plans have gone awry." Seiichi replied before Hayato could hang up, suppressing his emotions. Yet Hayato chuckled as though he had expected that response.

<Yeah. Whatever you say, man.>

"I'm leaving. Do whatever you want."

<HAHAHAHAHAHA! Gimme a fucking break. You escaped one reality just cause it wasn't going right for you, and now you're gonna run off with your tail between your legs again? *Where?* Ain't poss->

Seiichi hung up.

And like a man possessed, he headed toward the Western exit—the place where everything began.



The Sousei Airwaves van carrying Kuzuhara and the others was back in the central part of the Western District.

Parking the car at the entrance to the shopping mall, Kelly poked her head out the window.

“Heehahahaha! Mad splittin’ skills, amirite? This is victory! Hell yeah!”

“*He’s* the one who ran away, idiot.” Kuzuhara said wearily. Yua anxiously clung to his arm.

“Heehahaha...now what? What’re you gonna do?”

Though Kelly’s question was provocative, Kuzuhara had to think.

“If you’ve got time to be navel-gazing, why not just go after the guy? Or are you just gonna let him go like that?”

Not answering even the second question, Kuzuhara continued to think in silence.

He had spent three years under Seiichi’s command. Not once was he forced to work, and he never felt as though he was manipulated. Except during this incident.

But now that he couldn’t trust Seiichi—or the organization above them both—what was he to fight for?

“Hey, about what I’m doing...”

“No meaning to it, right? You’re just doing this for self-satisfaction!”

The answer was out before he could ask the question. Kuzuhara was left to wonder how he would pick up his jaw off the floor.

"Heehahahahaha! What kinda question was that s'pposed to be? You came here cause you *wanted* to. You don't have to hesitate or worry or get lost or look for some kinda meaning! Do whatever you feel like! You're not in the volunteer police cause you wanted to put on your thinking cap! Heehahaha! I remember! You said you became the volunteer police captain cause you wanted to drive out all the punks who were pulling shit at that restaurant. So go do it. Do whatever it is you want to do most, right now." Kelly said.

Kuzuhara had heard the same thing from Iizuka the other day. But in his state, he could not say on the spot what it was that he wanted to do.

Noting his silence, Kelly took off her sunglasses and leaned in toward him.

And with an unusually solemn expression, she continued. It was a different face from the one she used for interviews, or the one with which she had sent his heart aflutter.

"Y'know, I remember him saying something about destroying the rainbow-haired guy."

There was something like a shadow weighing on her shoulders, but at the same time she seemed to be clinging to hope.

"Your job isn't to judge people. It's to keep as many people as possible from getting killed. Right? Why do you have to make things so complicated?"

Silence.

Though Kuzuhara searched for a retort, he finally surrendered.

"...You're right. That makes sense."

And he decided to let it all go.

After all, it wasn't as though he had anything else to do in the city.

Kelly put on her shades, returning to her usual self. Kuzuhara frowned.

"Come to think of it, you told me you have a bunch of different faces. Which one is real, then?"

Kelly replied as though she had rehearsed the answer.

"Heehahahahaha! I don't *have* a real face! Never had one to begin with! It just all went *poof* ages ago after aaaaall these years in this city! I've always copied other people, so I have no idea which face is really mine!"

"Then whose face were you using just now?"

"Shoot! You didn't recognize it? Seriously?"

Kelly looked shocked for a moment, then howled in laughter.

"Heehahahahaha! That was Kuzuhara, Kuzuhara! In other words, *you*! From three years ago, though!"

Just as Kuzuhara thought to reply, his cell phone began to ring.

He took the call. One of his subordinates was shouting desperately on the line.

<This is bad, Mr. Kuzuhara! There was an explosion at the island entrance, well, the explosion's not much of a problem, but a lot of the rubble came down and the way to Sado is totally blocked!>

"Right. I'll be right there."

<That's not the only thing. Kugi was actually headed for the bridge when the explosion happened! He might be stuck on the other side, or he might even have gotten killed!>

Giving detailed orders to his subordinate, Kuzuhara turned to Kelly.

"Hey."

"Heehahahahaha! I know, I know. I know!"

Before he could finish, she stepped on the gas. The van trembled, then lurched forward.

"The press is nothing without the balls to back it up!"

She hit a button at the driver's seat. An ambulance siren began wailing.

'*Of all the knickknacks...*' Kuzuhara thought with a sigh.

"Anyway, that was one cheesy old ringtone."

"What do you care? It's from a movie I used to like."

"Heehahahaha! I know that one! You betcha. Wasn't it a pretty heavy cop flick? Now that I think about it, you told me about it three years ago. That *movie* convinced you to become a cop! Talk about *adorbs*! Heehahahahahaha!"

Kuzuhara turned beet red.

"Damn it, I told you I was in elementary school back then! Never mind, just go already!"

Then, he turned to Yua.

"Yua. If the entrance is blocked, is there a way onto the bridge from the city underground?"

Yua nodded and pulled out a small notebook from her bag.

"You can climb up the scaffolding in the unfinished road in B2, and you'll make it out at the lowest level of the bridge!"

Kuzuhara wanted to tell her never to go anywhere so dangerous again, but now was not the time. Patting Yua on the head, he flashed a rare gentle smile.

"Thank you, Yua. ...Were you scared?"

She nodded hesitantly. He adjusted his thick gloves.

With his stiff gloved hand, he ruffled Yua's hair.

"Then I'll make sure whoever scared you that much gets a hundred times worse than that."

Kelly heard the claim; she grinned.

"That's not very mature of you."

Ignoring her, Kuzuhara advised Yua.

"Yua. Growing up, you're going to face so many more scary things, just like today. It's not because of where you are. Whatever city or town you live in, there's always going to be good things and bad things. Do you understand?"

Not knowing how to respond, Yua simply nodded.

"No matter what bad things happen in the future, you can't pretend it never happened, okay? You have to accept it. Accept that it happened, and make sure you never lose to it!"

He put on his other glove.

"I won't lose, either. I promise."

There was a snicker from the driver's seat.

"You're talkative today. Sounds almost like you're never gonna come back!"

"It's true they're both dangerous, but don't jinx it!"

"Don't die."

Kuzuhara was not expecting that. He frowned.

"That's not like you."

"I'm not *dense*, unlike you. Heehahahaha," Kelly replied, maintaining speed. "In other words, I probably can't accept an awesome guy like you dyin'! Which is why you gotta hold off on the crazy stunts for my sake! Heehahahahahahahahaha!"

Kuzuhara tried to say something, but failed when the van swerved out of nowhere and knocked him off-balance.

Perhaps it was because she spoke with Kuzuhara that tears began to fall from Yua's eyes.

And to no one in particular, she whispered—

"I'm sorry."

She had never thought about anyone but herself. She had projected herself onto the city all this time and lived as she chased that phantom. As if she would find her lost family within.

That was why, when she faced the malice in the city for the first time the previous day, she was hounded by an unfamiliar terror.

In the midst of her fear, she had been tossed into a sea of unease, as though she had been betrayed by something she trusted.

Clinging to Kuzuhara, she sensed something. It was thanks to encountering the malice in the city that she realized it for the first time. Just like oxygen, it had always been present but invisible.

With both the goodwill and malice of the city's people upon her, Yua felt the strong presence of her father among them. It felt like she was finally starting to understand why he had set out to create a map of the city.

Yua cried quietly.

She knew it was not right, but she saw her father in Kuzuhara.

"Why are you apologizing, Yua?"

"Cause you're making that scary face, dumbass! What kinda shit piece of trash makes a little girl cry?" Kelly said, swearing more than usual.

"I-is that it? I'm sorry, Yua. I'm not angry at you—"

"We all get it now, so hurry up and cheer up the kid, you lolicon, you!"

"What the hell, Kelly?! I'll kill you! I swear!"

"Heehahahahahaha! Don't get mad, Kuzu! I promise I'll broadcast your ringtone to the entire island later."

"Don't even think about it, you idiot!"

Though Kelly and Kuzuhara showered each other with vitriol, Yua found herself relieved by their voices.

And with tears still trailing down her cheeks, she smiled.



A little earlier.

Saturday night. The top level of the Sado side of the Etsusa Bridge.

The starry sky was beautiful.

The lights on the bridge illuminated only the island and its surroundings. Further down the bridge was pitch-black. Perhaps the distant light in the northwest was coming from one of Sado's lighthouses.

The top level of the bridge was built for tourists to walk across. Abandoned construction materials and drum canisters were scattered everywhere, and there was no hint of life in the few buildings standing there.

It was almost the season for snowfall. The locals must have moved to a more populated area.

'No different from five years ago...what a disgusting place,' Kugi thought to himself at one of the island's entrances—the bridge leading toward Sado.

The island loomed behind him. Machinery and construction materials still remained in the unfinished buildings; the scaffolding and cranes cast distorted shadows. Light seeped out of the windows of finished buildings, turning them all into one massive organism.

It was the first time he had returned since that fateful day. He hadn't avoided this place—it had in fact been a taboo of sorts, and he had not dared to approach.

He did not want to break that taboo.

He had no need to remain in the city. He could be hunted down by Yili's men as a traitor. But that did not matter—for if he died, he could escape from his present despair. Even if there was nothing afterwards.

Seiichi's heart began to ache. It was his first time back since the incident. He had always avoided leaving flowers for her or praying for her spirit.

Even now, he had no intention of doing so.

His goal was to leave one more corpse on the bridge. He didn't know whose it would be, but even if it was his own, it would not appease the dead. And yet he was certain that she wished for his death. Because—

His cell phone rang.

<So you actually came. Thanks a bunch,> Hayato taunted.

"Where are you."

<Hey, chill out. I'm dyin' to talk to you, y'know. Remember? I said we'd be best buddies.>

"Enough of your jokes."

Seiichi looked around, but there was no one in sight. Only a single shed stood eerily under the electric lights and the moon.

"What the hell are you? Why do you keep poking your nose into my business?"

<Told you that before, too. Cause we're alike.>

"You're out of your mind."

<I know you know it too. We're carbon copies. Like a pair of mirror images. ...Although, specifically, I'm just five years ahead of you. No?>

"..."

<Didn't something stick out at you when you read my file? I was caught up in a civil war in South America back when I was 15. Then again, the whole ruckus was too damned small to call a flat-out war.>

"And that was when you lost your parents. Afterwards, you led a group of guerrilla fighters."

<Actually, I wasn't the leader. I had a real organization backing me the whole way through. I got treated like a pirate, or a bandit, and—>

"And you annihilated a branch of the opposing forces."

<Sure did. The branch that killed my parents. Sweet and simple.>

Hayato snorted. Then, his tone turned icy.

<In other words, I was just the way you are now.>



"Revenge?" Kuzuhara asked curiously inside the speeding van.

"Yeah. That's the whole truth behind Kugi's actions!"

"What do you mean?"

"Dammit, use your head, Kuzu! He said before that he lost his childhood friend, right?"

"Yeah."

Kuzuhara knew the story. The friend's death was supposedly the reason Seichi was so obsessed with keeping peace on the island—

"It's all there! The guys behind that shootout were goons from the Northern District, and Kashimura's crew, who were Western District flunkies back then! After that, Kashimura's bunch betrayed the West and went down South. In other words, this whole craziness is just part of Kugi's revenge plot! Gotta hand it to Yili's old man for raising the guy into a first-rate killer *and* a tool! Heehahaha! The Western District could've done it easy with all the power they got, but they deliberately spent five whole years makin' this happen! They mighta even planned for us to find out everything. They won't get their hands dirty, and even if someone finds out, the city'll just accept the whole thing as Kugi's dramatic revenge plot! Five whole years spent on that? Christ! Good for 'em, those Chinese mafia. They probably wanna tell us that they can afford to take their time, it's cool. But it's still hilarious. Heehahahaha!"

"This is not funny."

Kuzuhara recalled something. Seiichi said that he only solidified his dreams of ending violence in the city after he saw Kuzuhara. If that was the case, then Seiichi's business should have ended with the Northern District's demise. Then the reason he tried to kill Yua, a witness to the incident, must have been because—

"Because of me?" He mumbled out loud, then quickly abandoned the thought.

Whatever the case, he had to hurry and stop Seiichi. Whether he fled or made contact with Rainbow-Head, if Kuzuhara did not reach him now, it would be too late.

That was his duty, Kuzuhara felt. No matter whether he got angry at Seiichi or saved him.

'But still...'

With a complicated expression on his face, he closed his eyes.

What should have been a simple story of revenge had turned into a requiem of sorts for the dead girl. Seiichi's desire to bring order to the island must have factored into this plan. Had the Chinese mafia known when it used him?

If that were the case, the whole incident was trite and—



<—trite and absurd.>

"Shut up."

It didn't occur to Seiichi to hang up. Hayato was in control of their interactions now.

<Your organization used you, and you tried to use it. ...Nah, I guess it's the opposite. Your Chinese mafia would never have appointed you an exec. At least, not till they saw a chance to use you. You tried to climb to the top to get your revenge, and they saw their chance and pounced. They turned you into a killer who'd do all their crap for them!>

Drawing conclusions without Seiichi's input, Hayato chortled over the phone.

<But with that system, you'd never beat the organization. And knowing that, you still agreed to work for them. Just like what I did 10 years ago.>

"Enough!"

Seiichi turned left and right, eyes darting everywhere in search of Hayato. But there was no one to be seen.

He could feel unease rising inside. Hayato's every word had hit a nerve, each fact something he never wanted to face. Truths he didn't even want to remember, but memories so true that he could never escape.

'Even then! Why does he sound so entertained?! We're not alike. There's no way I'm like him!'

Hayato was completely casual, whether he was talking about his own or Seiichi's past. Seiichi could not let that pass unpunished. How could someone with a past similar to his be entertained by this to the point of laughter?

<But that's not all.>

"?"

Suddenly, the voice on the phone took a turn for the composed.

<There's one more similar thing in our pasts. One. Crucial. Detail.>

Seiichi did not understand what Hayato was saying. What more was there to say? If he had to be honest, Hayato's claims of similarity were not very important. Seiichi simply could not halt his overflowing bloodlust. That was all. Even though he had no idea why he so wanted to kill the man, things would end once either he killed Hayato or was killed himself.

Growing anxious, he replied quietly into the phone.

"What are you trying to say, Hayato Inui? If you insist on wasting my time, I will end this conversation."

Hayato would probably mock him to the end, Seiichi was convinced, but what came next was—

<Your friend wasn't killed by strangers. And neither were my parents.>

As Seiichi puzzled out the meaning of that remark, he grew pale.

Unable to say a word, Seiichi sensed the world around him crumbling. How did this man figure out the truth he had so desperately tried to conceal? Why, of all people, did this Hayato Inui know?



Hayato Inui discovered something interesting when he looked into Seiichi Kugi's past.

In the deepest bowels of the Pits was a place inhabited by those who were fleeing from the organizations above.

There, Hayato met a man who was once part of the Western District's organization.

"I-I-I didn't do nothin', I swear! Just asked a question, that's all. *Years* later, I-I just asked one little question! So why? Wh-why they hell're they after me now?!"

The man seemed to be unnecessarily afraid of something. He trembled as he spoke to Hayato.

"All right, all right. So just gimme the facts. What kinda dirt you got on Kugi?"

"I-I just thought, y'know? I took care of his buddy's corpse, but—"



<So I wound up hearing what kind of question the guy had about your girlfriend's body.>

The voice on the phone could not have sounded any more amused.

"Stop—"

Seiichi tried to cut him off, but Hayato's tone forced itself into his memories.

<So...do stray bullets ever hit *twice*?>

Silence. The waves and the noise from the city still filled the air, but none of it registered to Seiichi.

Only the voice on his cell phone existed to him.

The voice echoing in his head reawakened his memories.

And it arose, even clearer than his nightmares—

In the rain, she fell to the ground and began twitching.

Seiichi ran to help her; but his legs gave out halfway and he fell to his knees.

Yet his legs continued to squirm in a desperate attempt to save her.

Right next to her lay a man. A red stain spread over his chest, and rain filled his unfocused eyes.

In his hand, just next to the girl's face, was something shiny. It was a handgun, and the man had fallen without getting the chance to fire a single shot.

As the boy shakily crawled to the girl, his hand touched the gun. He tried to throw it far away, but his body would not obey.

With the gun lodged in his grip, he put his hand to her face. She was still warm; he could not tell if she was alive or freshly dead.

He hesitantly looked over at her. She was still breathing. But it was clearly unnatural. It was the death throes of a creature clinging to life.

Some of her organs were protruding from her ruptured side, and her bleeding showed no sign of stopping. Her eyes had rolled back completely, slowly turning green. It was a miracle she was still alive. But her face showed nothing but unspeakable agony.

His instincts wanted to look away from the grisly sight. Lost, he plunked down on the ground next to her.

'Just put her out of her misery—'

The devil seemed to whisper into his ear. He instantly stopped that train of thought and desperately cried out to her.

But after several repetitions of 'Kanae', her head suddenly turned to him.

Her unfocused eyes stared into his, and she began to say the words that would haunt his nightmares for years to come.

"Wh, why...why...didn't you...protect...me..."

Even now, he didn't know if he had been seeing things. Kanae could not have been in any state to move, and she might have already been dead at that point. Having no medical knowledge, Seiichi would never know for certain; nevertheless, that memory was firmly etched into his mind.

The one difference between his dreams and his memory was the tone of her voice—the tone that blamed Seiichi. As though she desired a companion on her way to death.

He did not know if it was because of a flash of hatred for her or his fear.

He merely thought to escape the reality of that moment—

And with the gunshot in his memory, Seiichi's thoughts returned to the present.

Reliving the painfully clear memory, Seiichi realized that he was surprisingly calm.

All this time, he had hidden that truth from even himself. He allowed no one to bring up that memory. Yili and the others seemed to know what had happened, but they never went out of their way to pry. They must have known; otherwise, they would not have placed him among themselves to begin with.

From the cell phone came a voice that summarized it all.

<You're not trying to make up for your girlfriend getting killed—you wanna atone for ending up killing her yourself. Am I right?>

In the silence, the voice on the phone was all he could hear.

Yet at that moment, Seiichi was uplifted.

'Finally...finally, I have a real reason to kill him.'

If Hayato knew the truth, there was no reason to spare him. Seiichi *had* to kill him.

<Long as they don't know that itty bitty piece of info, the whole city'll treat you like some tragic hero. But imagine how they'll condemn you if they knew.>

Seiichi did not care what the city thought; he was leaving anyway. But he could not permit someone to know the truth and live.

Once he killed Hayato, he would kill the man in the Pits, as well. In fact, he would burn down the Pits completely. Seiichi could feel dark flames licking at his heart.

He still did not know what it was about Hayato that so irked him, but that didn't matter now; he had a reason to kill him.

It was like a burden had been lifted from his shoulders. Seiichi calmly addressed the man on the other end.

"...And what about you? What *about* that makes me so similar to you?"

At that moment, a blinding light shone behind him in the distance.

Then came the sound of rapidly-expanding air, and something collapsing.

Seiichi slowly turned. The entrance that connected the island and the bridge was trembling in flames.

At the same time, he heard the sound of collapsing rubble over his cell phone. Hayato must have been standing closer to the explosion.

<There. I blocked off the exit, so it's just you and me now. One of those 'battle in the flames' deals you get in movies all the time. Fun, ain't it? You'd never get to try this if you lived a *normal* life. Let's live out a John Woo flick, just the two of us. Doesn't that just get your blood boiling?>

"What are you talking about—are you an *idiot*?" Seiichi retorted, but his bloodlust and anger, and the rest of his emotions, were gone. The dark, congealing glint in his eye had suddenly been shaken.

It was like he'd fallen away from the past and the world, and left to his devices in empty space. For a single moment, he had forgotten his past and the chains that bound him.

As he blankly stared at the fire, the last remnant of his chains laughed into his ear.

<Lemme answer your question. I'm just like you. It doesn't matter what you felt when you shot the girl, cause I don't remember how I felt, either.>



Ten years ago, when the armed men stormed his house, his parents had been forced face-down against the table. Hayato did not know what his parents had done. But from the gunfire and screams he heard from the rest of the neighborhood, he supposed that something was happening to the entire village.

Unable to communicate in their language, Hayato sobbed as he begged the men for his life.

The leader of the group grinned flippantly at Hayato, and did something unexpected. He took out a handgun and put it in his hand.

Hayato was lost. Was he supposed to fight back with the gun? That made little sense—countless automatic weapons were pointed at him and his family.

The leader's grin turned into snickers as he took Hayato's hand—the one holding the gun—and turned him toward his parents.

He then pointed at Hayato's parents, barking in a language he did not understand. Yet Hayato knew exactly what he was demanding.

'Kill your parents if you want to live'.



<Those guerrillas, they'd been doing that forever. Kidnap the kid and make him a soldier. And the kid's first mission is to kill his parents. Usually they'd kill someone my age, but they probably looked at tiny bean-sprout-me and thought I was younger.>

Seiichi felt himself slowly disconnecting from reality at Hayato's causal reminiscence.

"So...you shot them?"

<'Course I did.> Hayato replied, amused. It sounded like he was recalling a movie he had watched.

<I remember I hesitated. Then someone put a gun to the back of my head. But I don't remember how I shot my parents to death. Dad mighta said something, or maybe the leader made me pull the trigger.>

Stopping there, Hayato snickered.

In the meantime, Seiichi looked up and glared into the flames. A lone figure under the dying streetlights was looking his way. With the remnants of fire

and the massive and completely unharmed artificial island as the backdrop, the figure stood holding a gun in his left hand and a cell phone in his right.

They were 50 meters apart. Neither of them were holding out their guns.

Staring at the rainbow-haired man, Seiichi spoke into the phone.

“What’s so funny?”

Taking a step forward, he drew a handgun from his right sleeve.

With his cell phone in his left hand, he held out his right.

He fired the unceremonious first shot.

The figure in the flames moved slightly, but the shot didn’t seem to have made it.

Hayato’s mocking voice continued.

<Heh. This is where the fun begins. What’s so funny, you said? The funny thing is, I remember what happened right *after* I pulled the trigger. This is where it gets fucked up. There’s my mom and dad, all covered in blood, and I hear someone yelling outside. The guys in my house skedaddled, just like that! And they left me behind! Here’s the thing. The government forces just happened to show up at the worst possible second to wipe out the guerrillas. Talk about one messed-up sense of timing! If they got there 10 seconds faster, me and my dad and my mom would all be fine and dandy right about now. We’d have packed up and ditched the place, come back to Japan—>

The figure in the flames held up his gun.

A second later, there was a gunshot and a tiny piece of metal passed by Seiichi.

The sound of bullet against wind was overcome by the sound of gunfire, and as though on cue, Seiichi pulled the trigger for the second time.

<—and by now, I’d be some hopeless NEET failing to find a job—on the internet all the time, watching movies, talking about what singers I like and hate and watching year-end movies on TV—>

This time, gunshots rang out nigh-simultaneously from both ends. Though the bullets narrowly missed their marks, neither shooter let go of his phone.

<—and laughing without a care in the world—>

Another gunshot.

<—and laughing and laughing and laughing and laughing and laughing—
Ahahahahahaha! Hahahahahahahahahahah!>

Throwing back his head in laughter, Hayato slowly steadied his aim.

And though he made no sound, a smile had risen to Seiichi's face as well. His bloodlust was still absent, but it was like killing his opponent had become a duty—as though he had no idea why he was smiling. After all, from the moment of that explosion, this span of time was a closed-off world.

It had ended so easily for Seiichi, who wanted so desperately to escape reality.

When he thought about the past five years, what came to him was not anger, but laughter.

<Hahahaha.>

As though they had been friends from the start, they laughed as they closed the distance little by little.

"I admit it."

<Oh?>

"I'm just like you. I wondered how we could be similar, but now I see. We have the same eyes—no, we're both always looking at the same thing. We were always wandering, searching for an *escape*. Am I wrong?"

<You're right. That's part of the reason you talk all dramatic like that.>

"But I never wanted to admit it. That's right. The world's not big enough for two tragic heroes. My world only needs one hero—me. Heh...talk about useless. This must be what it means to hate those who resemble you most!"

<You sound like you're gettin' drunk on yourself.>

Hayato was snickering, but Seiichi no longer heard him.

As though mocking himself, he slowly put force into his words. As he pulled the trigger occasionally he spoke, sounding a little like he was crying.

“And that’s why I’m going to kill you. Me alone is enough. This world is just big enough for me alone. Because my own pretenses are my last escape!”

Gunshots ran down the length of the bridge.

Tiny fireballs traveled down the longest bridge in the world.

The gunfire was far from rhythmic, and both shooters scrambled between buildings and rubble as they fired.

Though irregular, the rate of fire only *seemed* to be random; for Hayato and Seiichi were pulling the trigger almost simultaneously.

Shots missed and sometimes grazed their faces.

Slowly closing the gap. Slowly focusing.

Barking under the dim lights, they were like a dog looking into a mirror—
—laughable and absurd and terribly meaningless and sad.

Gunfire shook the air above the haphazard mess of freight containers and crates on the bridge. But suddenly, the bursts of noise went silent.

Unable to land fatal strikes, the gunmen stopped on either side of one small freight container, backs against the wall.

Seiichi’s back touched the ridges of the rusted old container. Perhaps he should jump atop it like he did to ambush the men at the Northern District. But with the container’s height, even he could not make the jump so easily.

Many strategies volunteered themselves in his head, but Seiichi concluded that cheap tricks would get him nowhere against Hayato.

The freight container was very narrow—if he were to follow the wall to his opponent, they would be close enough to cross arms.

Then it was just a matter of reflexes and focus.

The next shot would decide it all. His pulse quickened instinctively.

'I have to kill him. But...if I were to take a shot to the head or heart—if I were to die—maybe that would be fine, too.'

Perhaps he should embrace being liberated from everything.

Seiichi was quite optimistic about his own death, but he did not turn his gun on himself.

'Not now. First, I have to kill him in this world of two...then become the only person in this world. Then maybe I could say goodbye to my past forever, just like him. Maybe I could laugh off the past I want to forget so much.'

'That's why I will shoot him—in the forehead, in the nose, in the mouth, in the neck, in the heart, in the gut, in the crotch, in the leg, in the foot—every last part of him. I will shatter the mirror that reflects me and my past.'

But the sound came the moment he began to focus.

Creeeeeeeak—

The freight container was opening.

'He's inside?!'

Seiichi was thrown completely off-guard.

The freight container had doors on either end. Hayato might try to come out the other end, but the door might have just been a distraction. And their guns were not powerful enough to shoot through the container itself. Then where—

There was an impact on his right hand.

Hayato had jumped from above, his foot slamming down on Seiichi's gun hand. At the same time, he kicked Seiichi in the chest as he leapt. Hayato

managed to balance with the momentum and landed a double kick to take him down.

Seiichi lost his balance and slipped, landing hard on his back.

'Above.'

He realized what happened the instant he fell. The creaking door wasn't just a distraction—Hayato had used the momentum to quickly make his way onto the container.

Before Seiichi could act, Hayato stepped on his right hand.

The cell phone in his other hand hit the wall of the freight container and bounced off. The call had not been ended—the phone rolled over next to Seiichi's head.

The rainbow-haired man looked down at him, laughing.

"<You know, I used to want wires.>"

The moment his advantage was set, Hayato suddenly launched into a strange tirade.

"...What?"

"<You know how Asian movies have a lot of wire action, right? I wish I had wires to hold me up like that everywhere, so I could move just like the guys in the movies. I kept thinkin' about it, and I realized something.>"

Hayato was serious; yet his eyes glimmered like a child's.

"<If you work hard enough, you don't need wires to make all that stuff happen.>"

There was a moment of silence. Seiichi stared incredulously.

"Are you...an idiot?"

"<If I'm an idiot, what's that make *you*, the guy who lost to the idiot?>" Hayato snickered. His doubled voice reached Seiichi both in person and through the phone.

'Now that I think about it, we were on the phone all throughout the shootout. It must've looked outrageous. But that doesn't matter. There's only two people on this bridge—me, and this rainbow-haired guy.'

"How can you keep joking around in a situation like this?"

"Cause this whole situation's a joke." Hayato grinned, holding Seiichi at gunpoint.

"We're just like a couple of dogs."

Hayato kicked away the gun in Seiichi's right hand. Yet he continued to laugh, as though his thoughts were elsewhere.

"Yeah. A dog looking at itself in the mirror. Some poor mad dog that doesn't know it's actually barking its lungs out at itself."

"Although the stuff we're barkin' about is all kid stuff. Immature."

Hayato took his foot off Seiichi's right hand. Then, he cracked his shoulder and turned away.

Seiichi was not expecting that; he spoke in a daze.

"What are you planning...?"

"I won. I'm happy now. You go ahead and atone or whatever."

Seiichi's smile finally disappeared. He did not understand.

'Won? Wait, a battle? What? Was this supposed to be a game? Something to win or lose? Why are you so sure you've won?'

"This isn't a battlefield. I'm done fooling around. And more importantly, *you* still got a home back on the mainland, am I right? I bet you actually wanna go home." Hayato said. Bloodlust surged in Seiichi.

"—stop—"

"You know why I fought you? Not cause I hated you or anything."

It was like the world Seiichi wanted—this space that was removed from reality—had been defiled at Hayato's hands. Hayato's guess was right on the

mark. The deepest recesses of Seiichi's heart had been pried open again in the end, though he struggled to seal it away.

"—stop reflecting me."

In spite of Seiichi's bloodlust, Hayato's grin only widened.

"I just felt so bad that I couldn't leave you like that. Lemme put it this way. I'm sayin', *you* still have a place to go back to."

Immediately, Seiichi took to his feet toward Hayato, who was only a step away.

"STOP REFLECTING ME!"

A second handgun popped out of his left sleeve.

"Whoa, talk about impatient."

The moment the Seiichi pointed the gun at Hayato, Hayato pointed his own gun at Seiichi's head.

Like a scene out of a comic book, they held their guns in a cross-counter pose.

But there was no action-movie banter between rivals there. A second later,

In the center of the world they escaped, the gunshots sounded; on and on—



'What just happened?'

The moment two gunshots echoed over the bridge, Seiichi's world shattered without a sound. The world composed of his bloodlust and sympathy for his foe collapsed instantly, filling his vision with the bridge, the lights, the haphazard construction materials, and the artificial island looming over it all.

The final gunshot was supposed to be Seiichi's escape.

But it was interrupted by someone.

The one who destroyed Seiichi's world.

The one who brought him back to reality...a man wearing thick gloves.



It was almost comical to behold.

Two men stood, holding a gun to each other's head.

And between them stood a third party, his arms crossed over the muzzles of the guns. The rounds had indeed been fired—but they never managed to so much as pass by their targets.

The rounds from the small-caliber guns were stopped at the palms of the man standing in the center—and a second later, they fell with a clatter onto the bridge.

Suddenly finding himself dragged into reality, Seiichi desperately tried to understand what was happening.

The man in front of him.

The man who was, until not too long ago, his subordinate.

The man said to be stronger than Hayato.

And the hero he feared—and respected—more than anyone else.

“...Out of my way.”

Realizing who the newcomer was, Seiichi poured every ounce of hatred into his eyes and glared.

The man's hands over the muzzles remained firm, like a snake having caught its prey—and yet Seiichi cried,

“OUT OF MY WAY, KUZUHARA!”

Kuzuhara only glared down at Seiichi in silence. As though looking down on the younger man—as though pitying him.

“Stop...stop looking at me with those eyes...don't look don't look DON'T LOOK!”

Seiichi tried to pull the trigger; but the barrel was firmly in Kuzuhara's grip, and the gun would not fire.

Seiichi turned to Hayato—Rainbow-Head also was staring, baffled, at Kuzuhara. In his case, he had already taken his finger off the trigger with a defeated shake of the head.

“...You will not kill *anyone* on my watch.”

A moment of silence later, Kuzuhara finally spoke.

“I don’t care about your ideals or beliefs. I just hate guns and want to protect people.”

Seiichi was the one to respond. Quietly, and with pure contempt for the man who dragged him back to reality.

“Why? Us killing each other has nothing to do with *you*! Why would you try to stop us?!”

“Do I need a reason to stop pieces of trash from killing each other?”

With his hands still restraining both guns, Kuzuhara landed a heavy kick to Seiichi’s gut.

“Urgh!”

“You can run away all you like. You can get yourself killed if you want. But... do *not* involve me, or Yua, or Kelly, or the city. I will never forgive you for pointing a gun at Yua.”

Holding the guns in his hands, Kuzuhara pushed Seiichi against the container with his foot.

“You know what belief I live by? ‘Never let the target escape’.”

Seiichi’s back was against the container, but Kuzuhara’s foot remained heavy on his gut. At the same time, Kuzuhara began to pull Seiichi’s gun toward himself.

Pulling the gun from Seiichi, along with the contraption that connected it to his arm, Kuzuhara tossed it aside and lifted the dazed Seiichi by the collar.

“That means I’m not gonna let you leave—whether it’s to some other country or into your own delusions!”

With a shout, Kuzuhara threw Seiichi. His injured shoulder and neck screamed, but he ignored the pain and hurled Seiichi to the ground.

"Ugh...gah!"

With an agonized gasp, Seiichi stopped moving.

"How'd you get here? I swear I blocked all the exits."

Kuzuhara shot Hayato a glare.

"Only the ones on the maps."

"Oh, oh, oh! Her! The girl! She did say something about finding detours with that notepad she was carrying. And speaking of! Man, without her, I'd have got caught by those black suits before I could get to the Buruburu van. I owe her a bunch, that kid."

Slapping his forehead, Hayato slowly lowered his hand.

Then he put on a faintly twisted smile.

"So now what are you gonna do? As you can see, I'm 100% devoted to getting away." He cackled. Kuzuhara raised a fist.

"...When there's a fight, it's only right to punish *both* parties."

The fist had Hayato's name on it.

"No way?!"

Hayato shrank, flinching. But Kuzuhara's fist never reached him.

The bridge was rocked by a burst of deafening noise.

At the same time, Kuzuhara's fist stopped.

"Argh...!"

Kuzuhara shook in time with the sounds, trembling as though electrified.

Hayato quickly saw the source of the noise.

Seiichi Kugi, who had been thrown aside and supposedly unconscious. In his hands was a large-caliber handgun he must have concealed; white smoke was rising endlessly from the barrel.

"Don't...get in my way..."

Like a man possessed, Seiichi slowly rose.

Kuzuhara remained standing, but he must have broken his ribs. Every shot was aimed at his torso, and the rounds were too powerful for his lightweight bulletproof vest. Though they did not get through, he was buffeted by agonizing pain for each bullet.

He froze, and fell forward. A broken rib must have pierced his organs—a thin stream of blood escaped Kuzuhara's lips.

Not even caring, Seiichi turned to stare only at Hayato.

"We...continue."

Stepping away from the container, he tried to put distance between himself and Hayato. Seiichi could not be in any state to fight after being thrown against concrete without even breaking his fall.

"Don't push yourself, man. You probably can't even aim in that sorry state."

Seiichi did not deign to respond. He held his gun in front of him.

His vision was not too blurry. At least, he didn't think so. But half the world seemed strangely dark. Were his eyes convulsing? It was like his eyes were darting in random directions in time with his heartbeat.

"I...I don't have anywhere to run anymore. You're right, Hayato Inui. After I ran to this city, I thought I could make something of myself. In this city separated from the world, I thought I could become a new me. I was convinced I could gain power. And I thought that would be my way of atoning for her. But...I avenged her, but I never got to make it up to her. So in the end, I couldn't become a hero—not even on this island! Which is why... I have no other choice! I have to escape somewhere else!"

Hayato's eyes turned cold at Seiichi's confused declaration.

"You can't just *decide* on a way to atone for her like that. Blaming others, acting like a kid—feels like I'm looking at the old me."

"Tell me! If I kill you—if I kill you, back in the world you dragged us into before—will I become like you? Looking down at the world from a step above, laughing off people, the past, and even myself?!"

Seiichi sounded half-mad. Quietly, Hayato replied.

"Is *that* the idiot I look like to you? This is kinda sad..."

He stopped himself just as he thought of continuing.

There was a pause. Then, instead of replying to Seiichi, he said—

"Ah, this song. It's coming from the city."

Just as Hayato said, there was a song playing over the bridge.

Buruburu Airwaves must have resumed broadcasting. The music was coming from the island. And turning his attention to the sound, Hayato looked past Seiichi—at the island itself.

"Don't change the subject!"

"To be honest, I'm jealous of you. Right now, for the first time since I got to this city, I seriously feel like hating you. Yeah. This *is* jealousy. Stupid, yeah, but I'm so jealous of you I want to kill you. But I won't. Cause that would be disrespectful to my hero."

"Wha-what are you talking about?"

The music rose in a crescendo, finally reaching double its original volume.

"Lemme tell you something. Back when *I* was falling into despair? I didn't have any heroes around. They don't exist in real life, y'know? Shit. This music's actually fucking sweet. Yeah...that's right. Every hero's gotta have a sidekick. The radio babe."

“What...?”

Trembling, Seiichi raised his gun and listened for the music.

He had heard the piece before. But at the moment, he could not remember where he had heard it, or why he remembered it.

“The only difference between you and me? You still got a chance. As long as there’s someone like that guy behind you there. ...But no. All *I* had were *movie heroes*, goddammit!” Hayato cried, almost in tears.

Seiichi slowly turned.

He finally remembered the song.

‘Kuzuhara’s ringtone—’

At that moment, Hayato Inui was unbearably angry.

He had lived through countless perils, but this was something he had never felt. Something completely new was happening right before his eyes.

Small flames from the explosion were still licking the air, and behind them were the lights of the massive artificial island, along with the sparkling stars. And before the twinkling mountain of rubble, the man rose.

He had gotten to his feet. The one Hayato Inui respected, the ‘self’ he wanted to become, was right there.

Like a movie hero—an unkillable man who could never lose. And with a theme song in the background like a scene straight out of a movie, protecting those he held dear—

The hero was truly standing.



Kuzuhara was falling into a dream. Though he had broken multiple ribs, his consciousness was drifting away from the pain in his body.

The dream was about to begin. In his vision was a scene from a past he didn't want to remember. The moment the abandoned factory building came into focus—

'As if I'm letting myself see this again.'

—he came back to his senses. Or rather, he forced himself to wake. It had been only five seconds since he lost consciousness. Kuzuhara's eyes flew open. Pain surged through his gut, all the way to his back, and even his unaffected neck was throbbing.

The top of his head ached. Kuzuhara slowly placed his hands on the ground. Each time he tried to push himself up, his nerves ran wild like a horde of crazed animals.

But even in the midst of his agony, even as sweat covered him, he desperately tried to stand. He felt something unnerving in his gut—a broken rib must be jutting into his organs and skin. Along with the pain, it cried out loud to his brain in a bid for recognition.

And yet he refused to surrender.

'I almost had that dream. I almost lost myself in it. The dream of killing the girl. The dream that wouldn't stop until I came to the island.'

First was the image of himself opening fire; next would be the girl's scream—the one that he never actually heard—and the bloodied girl would raise her head from amidst the scaffolding. Then the scene would always shift to his murdered superior. For some reason, there would be a gun in his own hand as though he was the killer, and he would awake with a scream.

If only he could laugh it off as stale and trite. Yet the dreams had haunted Kuzuhara every night since the day his superior was killed.

He came to the city as though fleeing from something. To abandon his past, to forget everything, and to forge a new life.

But it was all in vain.

His place of escape turned out to be a dead end. And with nowhere else to run, Kuzuhara was instantly cornered by his nightmares.

But one day, it occurred to him. Was it when he beat the pulp out of the punks harassing Iizuka's Restaurant? Was it when he agreed to join the volunteer police? Or when he first agreed to Kelly's interview? Or maybe it was when he informed Yua of her parents' deaths. In the end, he found no escape on the island. And above all, the past was a reality that could never be changed. No amount of struggling would take him away from it, and therefore that struggle was meaningless. That was what he began to think as he worked with the volunteer police, or sometimes as he worked on his own.

He didn't know if he was right or wrong. But he decided, at least, to believe in that conclusion.

If he couldn't run, he had to accept it. His past crimes, and even his weak self that tried to escape that truth—

'I'll accept everything—and continue to fight it.'

Why did Hayato and Seiichi hold each other at gunpoint, and why did they abandon themselves to needless killing? Kuzuhara didn't need the answers.

'I don't need to understand. And I don't intend to. Understanding them won't let me help them.' That alone he knew on instinct.

His ears focused solely on the men before him; the music from the speakers did not reach.

One of his favorite songs. A song from a trite old movie about a hero that Kuzuhara admired as a child.

As though blessing his revival, the music sang.

As though praising the hero's return, the lights of the city behind him glowed brighter than the stars.





Wiping the blood from his mouth, Kuzuhara faced down Seiichi.

'Ugh, my ribcage.'

He'd broken three, at the very least. He could feel his body screaming with each breath he took. He tasted blood in the back of his throat, but it was not enough to impede his breathing.

Realizing that he could still move, Kuzuhara glared at the younger man.

It was clear—fear had risen to Seiichi's eyes.

"Why...why're you getting in my way?" Seiichi's tone took a turn for the childlike as he turned his gun on Kuzuhara. "This has nothing to do with you anymore. Please, just go back to being unconscious. Or do you really hate me that much?"

Though his side ached each time he spoke, Kuzuhara impatiently forced his lungs to breathe.

"I told you before. My job's to make sure no one dies on my watch."

"You understand, don't you? Right? You ran away to this island, too. You know how I feel, right?"

At this point, Seiichi probably didn't even know what he was talking about. His gun alone was focused on one goal, desperately trying to take aim at Kuzuhara.

Seiichi was about to burst into tears. And without a hint of anger or condescension, Kuzuhara asked him a question.

"Why...why don't you realize?"

"What?"

Confused, Seiichi's gun lost its target—it strayed and wandered without purpose.

"You said that powerlessness was a crime. So why the hell don't you understand?!"

A gunshot.

Without warning, Seiichi pulled the trigger as Kuzuhara drew near, step by step.

His unfocused aim and shaky hands did not help his cause; the bullet passed by Kuzuhara's right side.

"You ran from society, from yourself, and the past, and you still don't get it? It took me just *one* try before I realized. You *still* can't get it through your head? 'Powerlessness is a crime'? Tough words for someone who's still running away from atonement."

If Seiichi was wielding his usual small-caliber handgun, he might have shot Kuzuhara in the head with the last round. But in his hands was an unfamiliar large-caliber gun.

With just a few paces left between them, Kuzuhara leapt up. With speed unthinkable for someone with broken ribs, he instantly closed the distance.

Seiichi reacted, holding out his arms at Kuzuhara's face to counter.

"UWAAAAAAAAAAAAAAH!"

Like a flashback, the face Seiichi was aiming at suddenly overlapped with Kanae's. And this time, he again chose to escape by pulling the trigger.

A single gunshot echoed across the longest bridge in the world.

The smoke cleared, and Hayato gulped as he looked for the outcome.

"Ah!"

Without thinking, he shouted in awe. There stood Kuzuhara, his grip on Seiichi's gun in front of his face. With his other hand, he was holding Seiichi by the neck.

There was no bullet in Kuzuhara's palm. Instead of blocking the bullet, he must have shoved the gun itself to change the bullet's trajectory.

But it seemed he could not escape unharmed. Kuzuhara's fingers were bent in odd directions, and he must have torn his skin from the way blood was

streaming from his glove. Yet with his remaining fingers Kuzuhara grabbed the gun and pulled it behind himself.

But then again, Seiichi probably didn't have the strength to pull the trigger again.

"Grk...gah..."

With his neck in Kuzuhara's grip, Seiichi was rendered motionless and unable to breathe.

He had used so much strength that, even if he were to resist, Kuzuhara could kill him with ease.

But Kuzuhara suddenly lowered him to the ground. Then, without giving Seiichi so much as a chance to cough, he pulled him up by the collar and lifted him into the air singlehandedly.

Seiichi must have felt the world spinning.

Thrown in a judo-like technique, he landed hard on the pavement.

Seiichi felt like his entire body was falling apart. He thought he heard something like a crack in the back of his neck.

"Hurry up and face the truth. There's no way you could find power in a place of escape."

'No, you're wrong. There is power. He has it—the other me had that power. When we were trying to kill each other just now, I know I saw—'

Unable to retort, Seiichi fell completely unconscious.

How did Kuzuhara look at him? With anger, or pity, or another emotion altogether? Seiichi had no way of knowing or understanding.



Pressing a hand to his aching ribs, Kuzuhara turned to Hayato behind him.

Two men remained standing on the bridge. But Hayato had already put away his gun, and seemed to hold no hostility toward Kuzuhara.

"Just tell me one thing." Kuzuhara said. Hayato grinned and took a seat on a pile of collapsed metal beams.

"What?"

"Who *are* you?"

"That's a pretty damned abstract question. I'm me...or I guess that's a pretty clichéd answer."

His grin seemed mocking, but there was no condescension in his eyes.

"You're different from the guy the files said you were."

"Well, yeah. The files talked about the 'me' that was in that civil war. But this is Japan. There's not a lot of land, but there's water, there's food, there's money, and there's people. It's great that you can be nice to people and still survive. From my perspective, anyway."

Slowly rising to his feet, Hayato walked over to the edge of the bridge. The scaffolding was jutting out over the sea, almost like a diving board.

"I was being pretty serious about taking over the island and shit, but that doesn't sound fun anymore. I quit."

Kuzuhara went after him toward the edge.

"I expected as much from the great Mr. Kuzuhara," Hayato said, amused. Standing on the scaffolding, he turned to look at him. "I thought, maybe on this island, I could be a hero. It's safer than the battlefields I used to roam, but it's still a closed world. Almost like a movie. I thought I could become something that I'd never been able to become. And to be honest, I don't really mind having been manipulated. In fact, I liked it. Cause I got a chance to be a bona fide hero."

"What did you want with Kugi, in the end?" Kuzuhara asked, ignoring Hayato's confession.

Hayato did not seem to mind. He shrugged.

"I wanted to watch him. To see if he really *would* turn out like me—I wanted to know if it was really my own fault that I turned into this crazy mess of a human being."

And, looking almost forlorn, he smiled.

"This here's a lonely place, Mr. Kuzuhara. It feels like I'm all alone in the world for some reason. That's why, maybe I wanted to bring him over to *this* side."

Holstering his gun, Hayato opened his arms wide.

"I'll be back one day."

Then he leapt, falling into the pitch-black sea.

"...Not if I can help it."

Instead of chasing Hayato, Kuzuhara quietly watched him depart.

"Is it over...?"

'My ribs hurt like hell, but I better take Kugi to a doctor, just to be safe. Getting tossed onto concrete without even breaking his fall... Damn it. After that, I'll make him kneel and apologize to Yua—'

Kuzuhara turned. His jaw dropped. Seiichi was supposed to be in front of the freight container. He quickly scanned the area, but Seiichi was nowhere to be found. Only the small handgun he had taken from him remained on the scene.

"'Never let the target escape', my ass...I lost them both."

He remembered the old saying, 'he who chases the fleeing rabbit loses the rabbit he already caught'. With a sigh, he looked up at the sky.

And with a self-deprecating grin,

"So maybe I'm powerless after all?"



“Slow day.”

Iizuka grumbled, holding out a fishing rod off the side of his boat. He was thinking of catching something before he started his transport job, but for some reason he had landed nothing all day.

“Must be all the bangin’ noises over yonder at the bridge. Some dumbasses makin’ a ruckus...shit. Time to call it a night.”

As he made to put away his fishing gear, he suddenly spotted something on the water—something with a seven-colored tint.

“...!”

As Iizuka watched, stunned, an arm rose from the water and grabbed a buoy on the side of the boat. Without thinking Iizuka threw aside the fishing rod and pulled up the buoy with all his might.

The man with seven-colored hair coughed for a while, before finally wiping his face. He looked at the captain of the boat and smacked himself on the forehead.

“Sorry, man. Looks like I’m gonna owe you one. Again.”

Iizuka was troubled.

“Sorry, son, but I gotta head over to Akadomari first. That all right?”

“Yeah, no worries. I’m getting off at Sado anyway.”

The young man then lay flat against the deck. Iizuka sighed loudly.

“A big haul, eh?”



It was a dark place. Not even Seiichi knew where he was. But from the air, he supposed he was probably in the Pits.

In front of him stood his girlfriend—specifically, the woman who played the part of his girlfriend.

Yili was flanked by many well-built men; her eyes were endlessly cold and dark.

It was a face she almost never showed him. The face of the boss's daughter, or the face of an executive.

Just as Seiichi stirred, Yili spoke. In a completely different tone from usual.

"So both our plans came to a stop halfway through. You got your revenge and we disposed of several nuisances without getting our brethren's hands dirty. But the harmony you wanted and the control we desired? We have neither."

Seiichi hung his head. He already knew, but even now Yili and the others did not see him as one of their 'brethren'. Though he was sad, Seiichi tried to hide his emotions behind a mocking grin. The same off-kilter smile Hayato had shown the world.

"You were too early for this city. It might have been perfect for the rainbow-haired man, but not for you. That's how far behind him you were. Simple as that."

Seiichi did not try to retort.

"The faces of the radio station, the faces of the locals, the faces of the lawless Pits, the faces of overseers like us, and the face of the one who's swayed by nothing—the interesting man called Kuzuhara. The despair of killing and being killed. The man who from the start bore despair even greater than the city's. The actions he took tonight alone were fascinating. At least, much more than you."

"I suppose that means I'm useless to you now."

"This city belongs to us. It's no place for children to run from reality."

Were Kuzuhara and Yua part of the 'us' she spoke of? Only Yili knew the answer.

"Are you...going to kill me?"

"You were helpful to us, even if your plans ended halfway. I don't kill helpful people. And I'd known from the start that this might happen. Ever since I asked you that day what you wanted with this city. When you answered, 'revenge'. That's why I'm not going to kill you. I'm only here to say goodbye."

"Then, while we're at it, could I ask for one last thing?"

Yili was not expecting that reaction. She frowned condescendingly.

"Do you even understand your position?"

"I do. That's why I'm asking you alone."

Yili stared into Seiichi's eyes for a time, then sighed in surrender.

"Fine. What?"

Seiichi smiled, relieved, and made his wish.

For an instant Yili returned to using the tone of his girlfriend.

"...You're such an idiot, Seiichi. It sounds pointless. But I guess I don't mind."

After hearing his request, Yili and the men turned and left—melding into the darkness of the city.

With a fluent word of goodbye in a language she had never used with him before.

"Zaijian."





終章『橋犬達』

Final Chapter: Etsusa Bridge Dogs

A man was dozing off on a jetboat bound for the mainland.

The jetboat ferries ran once an hour, and these new models traveled at over 100 kilometers an hour—which meant they only took about 40 minutes to reach the mainland. Water spouted spectacularly from the back of the boat to propel it forward, which probably meant that quite a few people from the artificial island would watch the ferries.

Putting on a seatbelt and listening to the end-of-year special programming on the television, Hayato Inui reflected on his past five years on the artificial island.

Having fled to Sado on Iizuka's boat, he made a small sum of money and decided to return to the mainland. Once he got to Tokyo, he would buy a forged passport and tickets to someplace like Southeast Asia.

"Man...didn't stay long, but Sado was pretty sweet. Shoulda gone sooner."

That was when a high school-aged girl suddenly came up to him.

"Um...excuse me?"

Hayato raised an eyebrow, surprised. As usual, he had rainbow-tinted hair and safety pin piercings. Did he have the wrong seat, he wondered, and quickly stood. The girl hesitated as she continued.

"Were you by any chance at the observation tower in Niigata five years ago?"

"?"

Confused, he thought for a second. And he smacked his own forehead.

"Ah...yeah! I did! On my first day here. Yeah. I was there. Uh-huh."

"I knew it! I was sure I'd seen your hair before."

With a smile, the girl sat down next to Hayato.

"No way...you're the kid who gave me her snacks?" Hayato replied in disbelief.

The girl smiled and nodded.

"Ah...aha! I see now! Look at you, all grown up!"

As he gasped in surprise, the boat started.

The jet engines roared almost like an airplane, and the boat slowly began to move.

"Oh right. Here. Someone in the waiting lobby asked me to give this to the person in your seat." The girl said curiously, holding out a small envelope.

"Huh? Who?"

"A woman. I think she might have been part caucasian..."

Hayato had a bad feeling about this.

"She better not have laced it with poison..."

He carefully opened it. Inside was a piece of paper.

As he read the contents of the note, Hayato's eyes went wide—and his mouth soon curled in amusement.

"Are you okay?"

"Oh, uh, yeah. It's just a love letter. That's it."

The girl burst into laughter.

"Wow! No way, from someone that pretty?"

"Heh! Lucky me, huh?"

It had been 20 minutes since the boat started. An announcement came over the speakers.

<We will soon be passing by the center of the Etsusa Bridge—the artificial island, which is still in development.>

The bridge and the artificial island were sightseeing spots for ferry tours. Being slower, ferries generally kept their distance for safety's sake. But the jetboat was able to get much closer.

"Hm? What are you doing?"

"Something bad. Heh heh."

As the boat traveled parallel to the bridge, the entire island came into sight. A small commotion began in the seats, and some passengers took out their cell phone cameras.

A second later, the cabin was overwhelmed by a roar.

Most of the passengers looked around, their eyes searching for the source of the sound.

The cause of the sound was simple.

The door at the back had opened, allowing the roar of the engines into the cabin. Those who had been on jetboats before did not care, as they knew things like this happened on occasion.

And as they expected, the door soon closed and the cabin was quiet again. Of course, the passengers only thought it was quiet because the roar of the engines had been cut down so suddenly.

As the passengers lost interest in the door and turned to the island, only the girl who had been sitting next to Hayato stared curiously.

'I wonder why he went outside?'

"Sir, the deck is off-limits to passengers—"

"Whoops! Sorry. Sorry 'bout this."

Hayato apologized sincerely as he landed a chop on the crew member's neck.

And just like in the movies, the crew member instantly lost consciousness.

"No one gets how long I had to practice to get this right..." Hayato muttered, taking out his handgun. After falling into the sea, he had taken it apart completely and cleaned out every last corner, making sure it would work. All he could do now was trust that the rounds were waterproof enough.

Enduring the violent shaking, he stood at the very back of the boat—in a blind spot from the passenger cabin.

The boat didn't shake quite as much as fishing boats did, but the wind and the water prevented him from standing properly. It was like getting onto a car driving down the highway. He remembered that the crew member who had tried to stop him was wearing a seatbelt as well.

When the boat drew nearest to the artificial island, he saw.

Standing on an aboveground point that jutted into sea was a man. Hayato recognized Seiichi.

'Look at the southern dock.'

That was the message in the envelope from Yili.

"You've gotta be kidding me. The same dock I used when I first came five years ago? Is this some kinda revenge plot?"

He did not know why Seiichi had sent the message. But he had an idea.

"So he wants to really wake up and snap outta his dream. Guess it's kinda my fault for dragging him into a dream in the first place. Makes sense."

Amused, Hayato held up his gun and took aim at the docks. At his foe's forehead.

And as though answering Hayato's horizontal grip, the figure on the docks held out his arm.

Though Hayato's eyesight wasn't spectacular, he thought he saw a grin on his opponent's face. At the same time, he felt like he had been beaten.

"Hah! Haha! That's actually damned cool! Asshole, it's like he's in a movie!"

'Then who's the protagonist that gets to live? Me? Him? Or do we both die and the credits start rolling?'

At that point, Hayato realized that was a foolish question.

'Me and him, neither of us are the main characters in that city. The city itself is the star.'

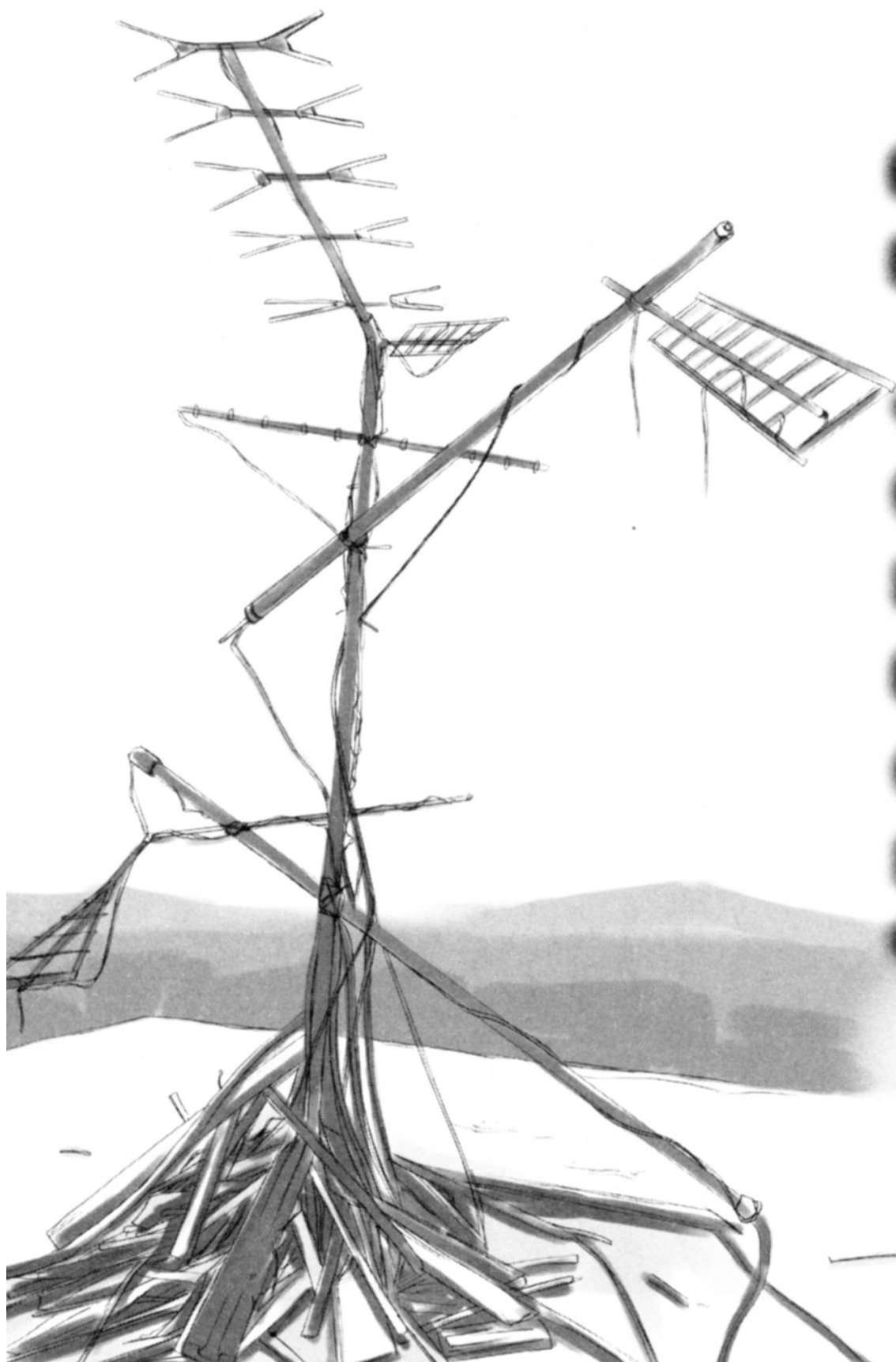
The boat moved forward, and the moment the gap was at its narrowest, the two men opened fire at exactly the same time.

Under the endlessly clear blue sky, the gunshot resonated into the air.



余章

『クズはクズ』



Epilogue: Kuzu is Kuzu

<Ah-ah-ah—Aaahh... Testing... Ahem. All right! Good day, ladies, germs, princes, princesses, grandpas, and grandmas. Time for more half-baked radio badness, straight into your eardrums! Whoo! Lemme give you folks a little sneak preview. We got a special guest for tonight's Buruburu Airwaves on the Street...the youngest girl in the history of our broadcast! FYI, we don't want any business with freaks underground who're on the internet all the time! Unlike your one-track brains, this kid's mind thought of makin' a map of this whole damned maze! Her name's—>

"Yua? I'm ready to order."

"Okay!"

Midday at Iizuka's Restaurant was just as crowded as usual.

A tanned girl looked up at Kuzuhara and hurried to him.

"One omelet-soba combo and oolong tea, please."

"Got it!"

Blankly watching Yua head for the kitchen, Kuzuhara fell into thought.

Why had Hayato Inui been so obsessed with Seiichi Kugi? If it really was a simple case of hating those most similar to him, Hayato could have easily just killed Seiichi.

'Maybe he was trying to save Seiichi from the same predicament he'd gone through?'

But thinking would get him nowhere. In fact, it even occurred to Kuzuhara that maybe Inui was trying to turn Seiichi to his side. But then again, Kuzuhara did not care to understand someone that outrageous.

So what had changed? It felt like something about the city was different, but it also felt like everything was the same. In the end, Kelly never did broadcast the truth behind the incident over the radio.

After all, now that Seiichi was gone, his corruption meant nothing to his former organization. The city itself did not seem to care about the mastermind behind the incidents, either.

The only people in the city who cared about organization politics were people from the organizations. And in this case, as the surviving organizations already knew what took place behind the scenes, the truth did not matter.

Nothing was done to Kelly in the aftermath, and the incident came to an almost boring close.

The only significant change, perhaps, was that the group that ruled the Eastern District—the group that had been silent throughout the incident—had taken over both the Southern and Northern Districts as well. Yili's family continued to rule the West, and had also taken control of the Pits as well. They must have cut a deal with the East beforehand. In the end, Kuzuhara remained on the volunteer police force, and the city's economy remained the same.

The bigwigs of the Eastern District must have already spoken with not only Yili, but with Hayato Inui as well. Perhaps the whole incident was orchestrated by the Eastern District's organization to begin with.

Kuzuhara decided he no longer cared. His thoughts moved on.

And as for the restaurant—

"Y'gotta buy, Kuzu."

"C'mon, Kuzu. Now that Dad's back, we're spending way more money on food."

"We know your ribs still hurt. Y'gotta buy, or I'm gonna poke you."

"I'm gonna hit you." "I'm gotta stab you!" "Eat you!"

Shoveling his omelet-soba combo into his mouth, Kuzuhara ignored the children.

"Hey Kuzu, did you know your ringtone was all over the island's speakers the other time?"

"What...? Ah, right."

When he thought, he realized that Kelly must have gone to the trouble of playing his ringtone over the speakers when he went to stop Seiichi and Inui. But Kuzuhara had not had the ease of mind to hear the song. With his ribs broken, he couldn't turn his ears to the speakers at the same time.

"That's how Kuzu beat the bad guys!"

"What? Says who?"

"Dad said the rainbow-haired guy said so! Kuzu, that song brought you back to *life*!"

"I never died."

"It's the power of love! With you and Kelly!"

"..."

"Who the heck powers up with a BGM? That's so immature!"

Kuzuhara frowned. "How is that immature?"

"Hey! So you're not denying the power of love thing!"

"All right, which one of you wants to be the first in line for a *real* tearjerker?"

Six children chirped and chattered as they surrounded Kuzuhara, who was blushing just slightly.

But when they saw their mother approach with a knife in hand, they scattered in terror.

In the woman's absence, her husband got to working on the yakisoba in the kitchen, sweating profusely.

"So it's all back to normal, huh."

On one hand, it felt like he had accomplished nothing. On the other hand, he was relieved. He hadn't really changed on the inside, either. But perhaps he would take some time off one day to visit a certain grave in Tokyo.

Quietly sipping his oolong tea, Kuzuhara remembered that one more thing had changed since then.

As if on cue, his oldest ringtone began to sound from his breast pocket.

In the city where the noise from the speakers mingled with the people's voices,

The ringtone sounded recklessly, on and on.

余

章

2

『

犬

の

末

路

』



Epilogue 2: The Dog's End

<Hah! As if handgun rounds would've reached from that distance! That was 200 meters, at least. I was expecting a sniper rifle or a rocket launcher or something, man! Were you even thinking back there?>

"...But you still came outside."

<I couldn't just run off. There was someone I knew on that boat. And if you really had a missile or something, it'd be my job to shoot it down like a badass. That's the least I could do.>

"Figures. You're an idiot."

<You jealous?>

"_____"

<You finally awake now? This ain't a movie. It's just plain old reality. Man-to-man duels aren't as easy as those B-movies make it look like.>

"..."

<You better thank Mr. Kuzuhara. I was just playin' around at first, but I'd have killed you if he wasn't around. Anyhow, I'm prolly gonna be pulling some banditry or piracy or some shit in Southeast Asia, so if you wanna come along—>

Hanging up, Seiichi looked at the gun in his hand.

The large-caliber handgun had always been at his side during his time in the city. It was the one that had killed Kanae five years ago, and more recently broken Kuzuhara's ribs. Seiichi had never reloaded the gun. And now that he thought about it, it was a miracle that the gun still fired after being unused for five years. It was the first and last gun he ever fired in the city.

Without a moment's hesitation, he put the muzzle to his head and pulled the trigger.

There was a click. Nothing happened.

After staring for some time at the sea, Seiichi quietly said to himself,

"...Let's go back."

The lonely young man headed for the city. Not the one on the artificial island, but to his hometown. To the island where the snowy mountains loomed.

As he made the long walk, Seiichi thought to himself.

He wondered—was the town where he and Kanae grew up still there?

The man who escaped reality because of his powerlessness was now returning to reality for the very same reason.

The young man who had never grown up would return to take back his lost time.

To finally make things up to her, and to the people he killed.

It had been years since he looked up at the mountains of Kosado. There was no snow on the bridge, but the peaks were wearing thin caps of white.

The kites circling the sky overhead were no different from those he saw as a boy.

Watching the birds gliding so gracefully, Seiichi quietly fell to his knees and wept.

-End-

了



Afterword

Hello everyone. Nice to meet you. And if you've read my works before this one, it's nice to see you again. Whatever the case, thank you so much for picking up this book.

This is the first story I've written outside my earlier series, *Baccano!*. The atmosphere might be a little different, but I'd appreciate it if you enjoyed both series.

As a matter of principle, I love the duel genre. I love a lot of other genres, but duels are massively varied and I never get sick of them.

I also love what people call B-movies or 'brainless movies'. I especially adore the ones that forego artistry and meaning and focus solely on entertainment, or the ones where the director really lets himself go. Basically, my love for self-aware B-movies goes to the point of admiration. (Of course, I love regular movies on their own merits too.)

So I thought I'd try writing a duel story like the brainless movies I love. But because I'm such a messed-up person the characters I put in the duel ended up being the main characters. That's just the beginning. I was planning a crazy battle involving superpowers and superscience, but ended up thinking, 'there aren't many Dengeki Bunko works that involve no supernatural elements. Maybe I'll give it a try'.

So this is what the mess in my brain finally came up with. I would be ecstatic if any of you found even a little enjoyment in this story.

I went to Sado Island on a research trip for this work. There were 20 days to the deadline. I had no laptop, no PDA, and no time to relax and take in the sights. I wound up going because I thought it would be a good idea to see the place I was writing about, so I took a one-day trip there all the way from Saitama.

I asked a friend in Niigata to show me around, but when I told him I was going just for the day, he said his face turned into Osaka's in the third panel of Azumanga Daioh. I still don't understand what he meant. Anyway, I took the morning Shinkansen to Niigata. And as I wondered if I could charge the

ticket to the editorial department and enjoyed the Shin-Niigata arcade, I arrived at Sado.

Only when the taxi driver at Sado told me that the island was bigger than the 23 districts of Tokyo combined did I realize the foolishness of my venture, but I managed to have a look at all the places I wanted to see.

Sado was, in a nutshell, one new discovery after another. The gold mines had been open until recently. The bookstores at Sado displayed the newest issues of Dengeki Daioh, but not a single issue of Dengeki Bunko was in stock. Sado cicadads weren't just fearless of humans; they actively charged at people. There was a stone sculpture of Ultraman in front of the stone sculpture store. You could see so many jellyfish from the bridge that you could get dizzy. Illegal fishing. And more. It seems like I've discovered only the most extreme aspects of the island, but the taxi driver was very friendly and taught me a lot about Sado's history and its people, its climate, and many other things. It was very helpful.

Long story short, Sado is beautiful in the summer. I can't express it all in words, but the island was so different from the mainland that I'm now considering taking a week or so off to visit next time.

As I said earlier, *Bow Wow!* is the first short story I've written. Whether or not it gets a continuation depends on my condition, the editorial department, book sales, and your reactions.

I do think it would be nice not to be tied to a series, writing lots of different short pieces, so please keep an eye out for my next work.

Below are some words of thanks.

This book was made possible thanks to the hard work of so many people.

I'd like to thank my editor for *Baccano!*, Mr. Suzuki, for taking up this series as well and even coming up with the title. I'm also grateful to the managing department, the publicity department, and everyone at the editorial department.

I'd like to thank the proofreaders and designers for making this book presentable.

I'd also like to thank my family, friends, and acquaintances, and everyone from S city. I'm especially thankful to my friend Kobaken, who not only accompanied me on my crazy one-day trip to Sado but even sent me mountains of information about Sado and Niigata.

I'd like to thank the taxi driver who waited for me to finish all my information gathering throughout the trip.

To Mr. Masaki Okayu for giving me permission to slip that little joke into the story.

To Mr. Suzuhito Yasuda, who sent me an image draft that encapsulated the world of this work, only a day after reading the manuscript. As of writing I still haven't seen the final illustrations, but the rough drafts were so cool that I can't wait to see what the final product will look like.

And finally, I'd like to thank all my readers for reading the work of a newbie like me, who's only been published for a year.

I'm sorry for ending this on a repetitive note, but again, I'm truly grateful to you all.

October 2003, at home
Listening to 'SOULS' by Hawaiian6 and
'I'm gonna eat you all' by Gachapin on repeat

Ryohgo Narita



9784840225496

ISBN4-8402-2549-4

C0193 ¥590E



1920193005905

発行●メディアワークス

定価： 本体590円

※消費税が別に加算されます

